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WILD-FIRE, THE BOSS OF THE ROAD: or, The Wolves of Satan's Gap.

BY FRANK DUMONT,

AUTHOR OF "WIDE AWAKE," "THE BRANDED HAND," ETC., ETC.



THE BRIDGE PARTED MIDWAY AND THE HEAVY COACH PLUNGED DOWNWARD, DRAGGING THE STRUGGLING HORSES INTO THE TERRIBLE GULF.

Wild-Fire, THE BOSS OF THE ROAD.

OR,
The Wolves of Satan's Gap.

A ROMANCE of the SILVER REGIONS.

BY FRANK DUMONT,
AUTHOR OF "THE BRANDED HAND," "WIDE
AWAKE!" ETC.

CHAPTER I. A CRY OF DISTRESS.

MIDNIGHT had fallen upon the scattered town—or rather "city" of Helena.

From every open doorway and window of houses upon the main street, came a flood of light and the sound of many voices engaged in revelry.

An observer might have seen groups of red-shirted miners gathered about the tables, and his ears might have heard the sound of both coin and ivory chips as they rattled upon the boards.

Every other house was either a drinking-saloon or a gambling-den where the miner's gold-dust found its way into other hands that seldom knew what it was to toil for it.

These were the "flush times" in Montana and the silver regions were flooded with the outcasts of society. Outlaws, gamblers and desperadoes ruled supreme in the lawless regions, and the pistol and the knife settled disputes and made "laws."

He who was quick with his seven-shooter was one to be respected, and the scientific handling of a bowie-knife gained a reputation for the manipulator and he was generally given a wide berth until some bully turned up that sent a bullet into the "knifist," while he, in turn, succumbed to an expert shot.

In a low building built of rough logs and boards was a group of persons intently watching the game in progress.

A table occupied the center of the room, and a counter stood at the furthest end of the apartment where a boisterous crowd were imbibing the vile liquors placed before them by the rough wolfish specimen of humanity behind the bar. Several revolvers lay among the rows of bottles upon the shelf directly at his elbow, as if the deadly weapons were in keeping with their bottled neighbors—both warranted to kill at forty rods—the whisky and the revolvers.

Grouped about the table, were miners and teamsters, with ponderous weapons protruding from broad leather belts. Several other persons stood beside the dealer, eagerly scanning the turn of the cards and the heaps of gold-dust and coin upon the "lay-out." From an adjoining room came the sounds of a violin and the tramp of many feet as if their owners were engaged in dancing.

The confused roar of voices and the incessant clatter upon the table as the chips changed hands, almost drowned the voice of the dealer. The light of half a dozen kerosene-lamps served to illuminate the room and cast a sickly glare upon the mottled crowd assembled in the place.

Near the center of the table stood a young man intently watching the dealer.

Close beside this young man stood a person whose evil countenance seemed all aglow with satisfaction; some secret joy caused his face to beam with pleasure; his cold gray eyes were fixed upon the pale features of his young companion.

A turn of the card was followed by the dealer's motion as he withdrew from the "lay-out" the losing bets. A groan broke from the lips of the young man, and a fiendish smile flitted across the face of the person at his side.

"Better luck next time," he whispered to the youth. "Don't be discouraged—you can't always lose."

"The young man vouchsafed no reply, but mechanically placed a quantity of gold coin upon the ace."

"My last bet—the last of my ill-gotten gains," he murmured. "God forgive me; what shall I do if I lose?"

Like a cat watching a mouse did the youth watch the dealer. The gambler's fingers trembled as he touched the faro-box. There was but another turn of the cards, and upon that turn the youth had staked his last dollar.

The dealer's fingers rested upon the small silver box, and the next moment he withdrew the card.

The ace had lost!

The gambler stretched forth his hand to take the losing amount upon the ace. Quick as the lightning's flash the youth leaped forward, and with one hand he seized the gambler, and with his disengaged hand he grasped the cards just withdrawn from the faro-box.

"Stop!" he cried, in a tone that thrilled every listener. "Don't touch a penny of that money, or you are a dead man!"

The dealer's face flushed for a moment, and then he grew pale as ashes with the rage that followed the surprise of the attack.

"What do you mean?" he cried, as he sought to shake off the grasp of the young man.

"I mean that I have been cheated, and if you touch that money upon the ace I'll kill you."

The crowd about the table drew back, and a low murmur came from every lip. They knew the dangerous character of the gambler whom the youth had assaulted, and they knew that unless the young man dispatched his adversary, now that he had him at his mercy, he would never leave the room alive.

The gambler's face was livid with rage and he struggled to free himself from the grasp of the young man.

"Let go!" he hoarsely cried.

"Return the money you have robbed me of. I have been cheated, and I can prove it to everybody's satisfaction!" cried his assailant.

"Prove it!" yelled the gambler. "If you don't I'll kill you in your tracks."

"I will prove it," cried the youth. "Here's the card you drew from the box. See, the King wins—but, close to the card—stuck to it with wax is the Ace! The Ace is the winning card, and I demand my money, and I also demand what money I have lost to-night!"

A cry of surprise broke from the miners, for, as they saw the trick, they realized that they, too, had been fleeced in a like manner. The youth had exposed the gambler, and his race was run with the red-shirted group.

With a quick motion the enraged villain slid his hand into his breast and a revolver flashed in his grasp as he withdrew it.

There was a puff and a sharp explosion as the pistol cracked close to the youth's temple. A severed lock of hair fell to the floor, cut by the swift passage of the gambler's bullet through the locks of his youthful assailant.

Before the gambler could again press his finger upon the trigger of his weapon the youth had seized a pistol from the belt of the nearest miner, and the next moment the cold muzzle of the weapon was pressed close to the villain's temple—so close that the polished tube seemed to be imbedded in the gambler's forehead.

A baleful light gleamed from the ruffian's eyes; his pistol dropped from his nerveless grasp and fell with a dull thud to the floor.

He saw the look of determination upon his victim's features, and the flashing eyes that told him of the slender thread by which his life hung at that moment.

"Return my money!" said the young man, between his clenched teeth. "I have robbed my benefactor to risk the money upon your gambling table, and you, in turn, robbed me by cheating. Return it, or as sure as there is a heaven above us, you are a dead man!"

Instinctively the gambler slid his hand into his drawer and placed several small bags of gold-dust before the man who now held him at his mercy.

The next moment the youth had seized upon the precious dust and placed it in his pocket, but never once removing the pistol from the villain's forehead, or ceasing to note his slightest motion.

During all this startling scene, the man who stood beside the youth had witnessed the action from a distant part of the room. At the first hostile movement he had slunk away, as if to leave his young companion to his fate.

"The gambler will rid me of him," he muttered. "He is a dead shot and Fred Gordon's life is not worth a straw. After all, I am rid of him. I have made a thief and a gambler of him, and now my vengeance is complete. Ah! what's this?"

The last exclamation was caused by witnessing the young man's rapid action and the evil-faced man ground his teeth with rage as he saw Fred Gordon—pistol in hand—holding the gambler at his mercy.

"Curse him—will he baffle me? No, he cannot escape. Poker Jack will fix him before he leaves this place. If he recovers the money he has lost my plans are ruined. It must not be."

The scoundrel drew away, and to his chagrin he saw the gambler return the gold-dust and beheld Fred place the little bags in his pocket.

An oath broke from his lips and his fingers toyed nervously with a concealed weapon.

Why does this person, pretending to be on friendly terms with Fred Gordon, seek his destruction, and rejoice when he sees his doom assured? Why does he bewail the young man's triumph over the cheating rascal whom he now causes to quail before his revolver?

A few words will explain the situation to the reader and introduce the characters. The dark-featured man is Donald Stone—a speculator and owner of bogus mine stocks. Years ago he resided in St. Louis, and there attended school in company with Fred Gordon. Donald Stone is but a few years older than Fred, but a career of vice and villainy have stamped an older look upon his cunning and repulsive features.

While at school the young men formed the acquaintance of Edwina Carroll. This acquaintance ripened into close friendship as the years came and passed. Suffice it to say that Gordon was the favored suitor and Stone was an unsuccessful rival. From that moment the young men were bitter and sworn enemies. Stone informed a circle of boon companions that Gordon's life would pay the penalty of his crushed hopes. The fellow suddenly disappeared and no traces were found of the jilted suitor.

The day of the wedding arrived and the young couple awaited the supreme moment with anxiety. In a few short hours they would be man and wife. While thus awaiting the ceremony, a bouquet of beautiful flowers was brought in and presented to Edwina.

She had scarcely inhaled their fragrance when she fell upon the floor insensible and to all appearance dead.

All restoratives proved futile, and the ceremony of a wedding was transformed into a funeral.

Fred Gordon's grief was something indescribable, and he raved like a madman.

The flowers had been saturated with a subtle poison, whose very smell was sufficient to cause death. It was some unknown drug, and it baffled the skill of the wisest physicians. The perpetrator was unknown, and all that could be ascertained to throw light on the mystery was that a tall stranger had handed it to the servant at the door, with the request that it be given to the young couple.

The body was placed in the family vault, for the features still retained the rosy complexion of youth and health. A second shock awaited the grief-stricken family, for the next morning it was discovered that the body had been stolen from the vault. No traces—no clew could be found to this second crime, and the best detectives were baffled in their efforts to unravel the mystery.

A year passed, and Fred Gordon was a changed man. He grew reckless, and finally sought a change of scene. In Helena he found excitement and a field to partially drown his sorrows. One evening he met Donald Stone face to face in the crowded street. Astonishment was followed by explanations, and the wily villain told a plausible story and expressed sorrow for his former rival. The rivals became friends. Step by step Donald led Fred on to the gaming-tables, and finally lured his victim to appropriate funds confided to his care by his employer. Fred was fascinated by the gambling-table, and, listening to the snake at his side, he took the funds from the safe, expecting to replace them before the loss could be discovered. Donald arranged matters with Poker Jack, and, to his joy, he saw Fred losing every dollar of the funds he had taken. Donald intended to denounce Fred the moment the money was lost, and thus disgrace him; but the unexpected turn of affairs dashed the scoundrel's plans.

Hardly had Fred pocketed the gold-dust when a woman's scream electrified the assembled group in the room, and a piteous voice shrieked aloud:

"Save me! Save me!"

CHAPTER II.

DOOMED TO THE FLAMES.

THE cry of distress caused each man to pause, and for a moment the quarrel between Gordon and the gambler was lost sight of.

Following the scream came an oath from the lips of Donald Stone; and then a woman darted into the room as if fleeing from an unseen enemy.

She came from the rear room in which the dance was in progress.

The girl—for she could scarcely have been more than nineteen—reached the center of the room and the miners fell back to give her a free space, and to ascertain the cause of her terror.

Her golden hair streamed out behind as it swept aside the slight fastening, and her pale, but beautiful face, was turned toward the group as if mutely imploring their aid.

In a moment her eyes rested upon Fred Gordon and a thrilling cry broke from her lips as she staggered toward him and fell at his feet.

"Fred! Fred!" she gasped.

"Edwina! My darling! Can the grave yield up its dead?" cried the young man, as he tenderly raised the girl from the rough floor.

"Am I awake, or am I dreaming?"

"I'll wake you from your dream!" yelled Donald Stone, dashing forward, and his hand sought a murderous-looking knife that flashed instantly into view.

"Donald Stone, what is the meaning of this treachery?"

Fred supported the fainting girl in his arms while he turned to face his newly-found enemy.

"It means that once again you cross my path; once again your presence threatens to dash my hopes to the earth; but we meet under different circumstances, this time. You are in the lawless regions of Montana, and I am both powerful and influential in this section. Further concealment is useless. We are sworn enemies and you are in my power. Look your last upon the girl you now hold in your arms, for you are doomed!"

The villain almost yelled every word, and as he concluded the last words of his wild speech, he brandished his weapon in a threatening manner.

Another character came upon the scene. It was the person in pursuit of the girl. With an oath upon his coarse lips he bounded into the room in time to obtain a glance of the tableau afforded by the strange group in the room. He saw Edwina in the arms of the young man, and witnessed Donald Stone's hostile attitude.

"What's the matter, captain?" he cried as he drew near.

"Confound you!" hissed Donald as he turned savagely upon the new-comer, "why did you allow her to escape from that room? Curses upon you and the old hag! What good are you to me? See what you have done!" The ruffian pointed to the young couple and then added:—

"Out with your weapon! He must not leave this place alive!"

"Stop! Advance another step at your peril. This girl is under my protection, and I'll defend her with my life. Men—one word with you," and Fred turned to the group of miners as he spoke. "I am single-handed and incumbered with this fainting girl. These two ruffians are armed and ready to take my life. All I ask is fair play—one at a time. Fair play is all I ask; am I to have it?"

"Yes!" roared a dozen voices and full as many ominous clickings of firearms echoed the shout.

For a moment Donald Stone quailed, and his brutal follower shrunk behind him. The gambler sought a secure place behind the faro-table and toyed with a hidden pistol. The ruffians knew the spirit of the rough miners, and they knew full well that the red-shirted group bore them no love.

The young man had exposed the gambler's trick and that alone turned the group against the card sharper. Fred had appealed to the miners, demanding fair play, and that was another score in his favor. Donald Stone and his confederate, although feared, were universally hated by the denizens of Helena. No positive proof could be laid at his door regarding numerous stage-coach robberies, but it was almost a certainty that Donald Stone was the recognized head of the desperate band of road-agents that infested the silver regions. That he had a lawless crew at his back was not to be doubted, and even in the very group that gathered around Fred Gordon, were some of the ruffian's followers. These were waiting the signal for a general conflict and stood ready to obey their leader's orders. Still the majority of those gathered in the room were hard-fisted miners, bent upon seeing fair play, and to allow no harm done to the fair girl who had sought protection in their midst.

As the cry of the miners fell upon the ears of the road-agent he saw that the time had arrived for a desperate and rapid conflict.

"Now's the time!" yelled Donald; "down with him, and death to all who oppose us!"

His revolver cracked spitefully and a bullet winged its way close to the young man's head; a scream broke from Edwina's lips.

Following the shot came an angry shout from the assembled group. Instantly—as if by magic—every lamp was extinguished and the place was plunged in total darkness.

Then followed a rapid discharge of weapons and the sound of falling tables, chairs and the crash of bottles.

"This way—this way!" whispered Edwina, seizing Fred's hand. Come in this direction."

Carefully avoiding the mass of struggling men, she quickly led the way toward the door through which she had first entered.

By the momentary glare of discharged firearms she saw the door, and a second later she had opened it and the young couple escaped from the room.

The yells of the combatants arose like the howling of a tempest, and the pistol-shots followed in quick succession as both friend and foe struggled in the dark.

Edwina hastily ascended a rickety flight of steps, followed by Fred. They had scarcely reached the landing above when the motley crowd that had been engaged in dancing rushed forth, pell-mell, from the rear room, to ascertain the cause of the row. In a few moments a flood of light was thrown into the bar-room, revealing a scene of wild confusion. Men grappling in deadly combat lay upon the floor, and the sulphurous smoke of the revolvers filled the room and hung like a pall from the low ceiling.

Donald Stone stood at the door leading to the street. He grasped a brace of six-shooters, and it was evident he had hastily taken possession of the exit in order to intercept the fugitive and her champion.

A yell of rage issued from his purple lips as the light revealed the mass in the room and failed to disclose the forms of Fred Gordon and his beautiful companion.

"A thousand curses upon you, Jack Turner: they're gone! They've escaped," and the desperado howled like a madman and shrieked with fury.

The conflict ceased as the desperado yelled the concluding words.

The burly ruffian addressed as Jack Turner darted toward Donald.

"You say they have escaped? Which way did they go? Did they pass you?" he cried, breathlessly.

"No," replied Stone; "they did not pass out through this door."

"Then they are still in the house; they are caged!" shouted Turner, and he darted toward the low doorway, followed by Stone.

In a moment, a half-dozen well-armed men had formed a barrier between the miners and the door, to prevent the angry crowd from following the two ruffians.

Their threatening aspect and ugly revolvers held the miners in check.

In the meantime the girl had reached the upper part of the rough wooden building and darted into a room.

"Quick! Follow me into this room; it is our only chance. From this window we may be able to escape. We certainly cannot do so from the lower part of the house."

She seized Fred's hand and drew him into the room, just as the heavy footfalls of the pursuers sounded upon the steps and their harsh voices arose in exultation.

She closed the door and eagerly glanced about for the heavy wooden bar to secure it.

The dim light of a kerosene lamp disclosed the bar lying upon the floor, and a second later the noble girl had thrust it into the sockets and barred the entrance.

Not a moment too soon, however, for a hand tried the door, and shook it violently.

Then came a blow upon the panels, and Donald Stone's voice bade the occupants open the door at once.

"Open, or I'll break it in!" he yelled.

Fred fired at the center of the door, and a deep groan told that the bullet had found a lodging-place among the ruffianly crew now engaged in battering down the frail barrier.

Edwina sprang toward the window and glanced into the open space in the rear of the building.

She started back with a scream of surprise; the forms of men moved hither and thither in the gloom, showing they were on the alert and ready to cut off escape in that direction.

"Lost! lost!" she moaned, and she turned her white features toward her companion. "We will die together."

Again the ruffians thundered at the door and the frail barrier was rapidly giving way to the force brought against it.

"Fred! one word. Believe me true to you. I am free from guilt—I am just as innocent as the day when I placed my hand within yours and promised to become your wife."

"I believe you, my darling."

He pressed his lips to hers and then started

nervously backward as, with a loud crash, the door fell in, and the villainous crew poured into the small apartment with leveled weapons.

Edwina rushed forward and her white arms encircled her lover's neck and her slender figure endeavored to shield his form from their deadly firearms.

"Down with him, if he moves hand or foot! Be quick about it, for the vigilantes are aroused. Seize the girl and shoot down that whelp if he resists!"

Donald spoke fiercely, and, pistol in hand, he strode before the young couple.

Before he could make a hostile movement, a desperado near the window uttered a cry of warning and raised his hand.

"Captain! the house is surrounded! we know who they're after! Let us be quick and get out of this or we're all bagged!"

"They're after Wild-Fire," cried Donald with a sneer, "but they'll wait a mighty long time before he falls into their clutches. Not a moment can we spare. Cage the girl and down with the young bantam!"

A half-dozen ruffians darted forward, and before Fred could offer a stubborn resistance he was thrown violently to the floor and bound hand and foot.

"Remove the girl!" cried Donald. "You know the secret exit. Quick, or the cursed vigilantes will give us trouble. Remember, your lives will answer for the girl's safety."

Screaming and pleading the fair young girl was borne from the room and hurried downstairs by the rascals delegated for that purpose by the arch scoundrel.

"What's to be done with the young fellow?" asked Turner, pointing to the prostrate form of Fred Gordon.

Donald Stone seized the kerosene lamp and dashed the fluid upon the young man, completely saturating his clothing and the floor upon which he was lying. The villain sprinkled the oil in such a manner that Gordon's body was covered with the fluid.

"What's that for?" demanded Turner.

A grim smile played upon the evil countenance of the villain as he flung away the empty lamp and produced from a capacious pocket a dark-lantern and turned its rays upon the bound form of his victim.

"Listen to the dogs!" he said.

The cries of the crowd surrounding the building came like the roar of the angry waves upon a rock-bound coast.

"I'll treat them to a sight!" he said, and he ignited a piece of paper and brought forth some combustible matter from a closet. He cast the flaming paper among the light rubbish and tongues of fire leaped upward.

"He is pretty well soaked in the oil, and so is the floor. Don't you see through it?" he yelled to his confederates. "He'll make a nice bonfire. No power on earth can save him. See, the flames reach the oil, and death claims him—ha! ha! ha!"

Donald Stone and his confederates rushed forth from the burning room and closed the door upon their helpless victim.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE POWER OF THE OUTLAW.

A DEEP and wide gully ran beside the roadway, and over this gully the houses forming the principal street had been erected. The gully answered the purpose of a cellar to each building, and also a convenient hiding-place for those seeking safety in rapid flight.

The two men in charge of Edwina proceeded down-stairs and passed into the low room used for dancing-parties. In the center of this room they raised a trap-door, disclosing the gloomy depths of the gully. They descended by means of a rough pair of steps.

The tumult outside was increasing every moment, and a volume of smoke came pouring down from the room overhead.

"The captain has fired the old shanty. Wait a moment; he may want to use this passage, also!"

The black-whiskered ruffian paused upon the steps, holding the trap-door open.

A moment later and the hurried tramp of feet came from the adjoining room, and Donald Stone, followed by his villainous crew, came bounding into the room. Each outlaw descended through the trap, leaving one of their number to close it after all had safely reached the bottom of the gully. Volumes of smoke rolled down into the room from above, and a crackling sound told that the flames were devouring the dry combustibles and rapidly spreading.

Donald Stone led the way under the buildings

followed by his men. They followed the zig-zag course of the gully until they emerged from beneath a rickety old wooden shanty and came into an open space.

Several horses stood in a clump of trees not a dozen rods away and an outlaw held them ready for immediate use.

Scarcely had the foremost ruffian appeared in the open space when a bullet whizzed past his head and a chorus of shouts broke upon the night air; a score of men came dashing toward the retreating rascals.

"The vigilantes!" roared Donald. "Each man strike out for himself and make for the head-quarters."

The desperado seized Edwina in his brawny arms as if she had been a mere infant and sprung toward the horses, followed by several of his companions. A moment later he was in the saddle, and reaching down he seized the girl and placed her upon the pommel before him. Then he sunk the spurs into the flanks of the steed he bestrode and the animal sprang forward like an arrow from a bow.

A rapid discharge of pistols awoke the slumbering echoes and cut the air close to the escaping bandits. Donald Stone's mounted confederates dashed after their leader while the balance of his followers sought flight among the huge bowlders and thick bushes skirting the hillside.

The sounds of pursuit grew fainter as the outlaw and his cavalcade plunged into the wild passes and canyons of the vicinity.

"Now, my pretty one," he whispered to the trembling girl, "you are again in my keeping and I'll warrant you will not again escape. This has been a sad night's work for you. You have hastened your lover's death. He is bound and helpless in yonder burning building and no power can save him from the flames. You will forget him and remember hereafter that you are mine and mine alone."

Donald turned in his saddle and uttered a fiendish laugh as he beheld the dull glare in the sky—reflecting the flames of the distant burning building.

A low groan of anguish issued from the lips of the fair captive and her head sunk upon her bosom and tears pattered down upon her cheeks.

"Why do you persecute me?" she moaned. "I have never harmed you, and yet you have kept me in captivity, and compelled me to remain in this wild country—far from home and kindred."

The outlaw laughed—a cruel and mocking laugh that caused the girl to shrink away from him.

"Why do I persecute you? That question is easily answered. You mistake my love for persecution. Once you refused those attentions and accepted the love of one whom you will never see again. When one plan fails I generally try another. You remember the manner in which I cheated Fred Gordon of his bride? I stole your inanimate form from the vault and bore you to the Far West—not without trouble and care, however. Once here you were in the paradise of the fearless and the free. Surrounded by a devoted band of followers I rule supreme. Your home is among the brave and reckless spirits, and you will never again behold the cities of the East. If you remain here for years you will see the same bleak mountains and dismal ravines, for they are my home and yours. Mine you will be, though I patiently wait years for your free consent. Kindness has failed to gain your heart but force will eventually win it. You begged hard to accompany me to Helena, and I, fool that I was, granted your request, although I placed you in the care of one of my trusted followers. You managed to elude him and discover that Fred Gordon still lived and was so near to you. But that discovery has proved fatal to him. He is beyond the aid of human power, and you have caused the tumult that ensued. The vigilantes are on my track and I will be compelled to remain in the mountains. Once in the impenetrable chain of hills, I defy an army to dislodge me, or trail me to my secret rendezvous."

Donald Stone's voice grew harsher as he proceeded, and when he spoke of the vigilantes he fairly hissed the words, and maliciously spurred the horse forward while a muffled oath lingered upon his tongue.

Edwina failed to suppress the sobs that arose to her lips. She had met the man she loved devotedly and had been rudely torn from his side, while he was doomed to a horrible death amid the flames.

The wretch who had wrought all this misery

sat close beside her, and she was a helpless captive in his hands.

In her hour of sorrow her lips moved in prayer, and even as she rode among that outlaw band, her supplications arose to the All-seeing Ruler and implored His aid.

Perhaps Fred was saved from his perilous position, and the flames had been robbed of their victim. She still hoped against hope. After the long separation she had met the one who was her husband in the sight of heaven, and yet she was forced away by the man she loathed and feared.

No wonder the poor girl's tears fell thick and fast, and she drew away from the ruffian as if his very touch was far more poisonous than the adder's. Perhaps an opportunity would present itself whereby she could escape and successfully elude the outlaw. Buoyed up by this thought she partially checked her tears and again murmured a prayer.

Donald's followers rode at a respectful distance, and in the dim light the cavalcade resembled grim phantoms mounted upon specter steeds.

Upon either side the tall jagged rocks towered like the walls of an ancient fortress.

Now and then the horsemen crossed swift but narrow streams that swept across the narrow roadway.

It was evident that the outlaws had selected this intricate road through the ravines in order to mislead any parties following in pursuit, and also to select good points in case of close quarters, whereby the pursuing party could be held in check and destroyed.

It was easily to be seen that Donald Stone expected no pursuit, for he allowed the horse to pick his way over the rough road in the defile. His confederates grasped their weapons and rode behind their chief, ready to turn and face any pursuing party. Not a word came from the mounted bandits. They rode in silence but on the alert, while mile after mile was rapidly traversed, and the gloomy shadows deepened in the ravines. Again and again Donald endeavored to converse with his captive, but she refused to reply or even to glance toward the brutal creature who held her in his power.

"You won't talk to me?" he said gruffly. "Perhaps I can induce you to talk by mentioning Fred Gordon's name."

A slight shudder swept through the little form and a moan issued from her lips; Donald saw the advantage he had gained. "I thought that would cause you to utter a word or two," he said; "but you might as well cease to think of him. He is dead—dead to you, and the sooner you realize the fact that you are to be mine—the better for you."

"Yours?" she gasped. "Sooner would I die the most horrible and lingering death than human agency can suggest! Yours? Never! when I see that all hope is gone I will kill myself at your feet, but while I live and breathe you can never claim me. You can never break my resolutions; I will die still gasping the words *I hate you*—murderer of the one I love even beyond the grave."

Her voice thrilled the outlaw and its tones rung in his ears. He listened attentively, and when she had concluded he bit his lips to suppress the rage that surged upward from his heart and he even clinched his hand to strike the beautiful girl that had denounced and defied him, but he wisely checked himself.

You will change your opinion before long. You will sue for a kind word and beg for a smile. I'll break your proud spirit. You forget that we are far from the haunts of civilization. We are in the wild regions where might makes right. I rule these regions, and the name of "Wild-Fire" is dreaded even by brave men, and shall I allow a weak girl to openly defy me and dictate to me? No! Enough of this foolish talk. Willing or unwilling you are mine. Threats, tears and supplications will not avail you. My word is law, both with my lawless followers and with you."

Donald grasped the reins of his steed and again urged the beast forward. "Coward! do your worst! I still breathe words of defiance!" said Edwina.

Placed in such a position and having no hope of mercy from the villain, her proud and brave spirit had asserted itself and the young girl fully determined upon desperate measures to protect herself.

The very name of "Wild-Fire" had sent a thrill of terror thorough the territory. He was the most crafty and daring of all road-agents—the most reckless of all robbers, and his exploits sent dismay into every part of the silver regions.

Wild-Fire had skillfully concealed his identity under a most repulsive mask. His followers were masked in the same manner.

Various rewards had been offered but no amount of money had yet put the vigilantes on the track of this "Boss" of the road. The treasure-boxes of the coaches continued to pour out their valuable contents into the treasury of the bold robber, and the mining-camps paid the tributes exacted by the fearless ruffian. But, who was he? No one had ever caught a glimpse of his face. Surrounded by his bold riders and followers he moved a living mystery—a man without a face—a man without a name.

Yet, Edwina had discovered the identity of the robber chief. Donald Stone had revealed the secret to her! The man whom she had rejected was the man feared in the silver regions—hunted by the vigilantes with a price upon his head!

The group of horsemen plunged into a deeper ravine and had just emerged upon a level plateau when a voice came from the gloom beyond.

"Who goes there?" was the challenge. "The Wolves of Satan's Gap," responded Donald.

CHAPTER IV.

"CRAZY LUKE."

CLOUDS of smoke rolled through the little room where Fred Gordon lay helpless on the floor, bound hand and foot in the center of a fiery circle. Tongues of flame leaped wildly toward him, fed by the oil upon the floor, and each second drawing nearer to the doomed man.

It was a most appalling moment, for his life trembled in the balance. Breathing became difficult, and each effort to inhale the air choked him with the dark smoke that rolled over and enveloped him like a thick pall. Another effort to gain but a mouthful of air and Fred gave himself up for lost.

A sheet of flame darted over him and part of his clothing was seized upon by the fiery monster.

At that very instant the window was shattered and hurled into the room and a form leaped into the smoke and flame. The person crept rapidly to the prostrate form upon the floor, and seizing the young man bore him to the open window. Not a moment too soon was this accomplished, for the flames darted after both rescued and rescuer as if angry in thus being robbed of their prey. They roared through the apartment and came like a legion of demons toward the window. Several quick slashes with a keen knife severed the ropes binding Fred and he stood forth, untrammelled.

"Quick! Lose not a moment! Out of that window or we are both lost!" shouted his rescuer.

Fred darted through the window, and his quick eye discovered the manner in which his rescuer had reached it.

A tree grew close to the building, and one of its branches almost touched the window-sill.

Fred sprang outward, and, grasping the limb, swung himself out toward the trunk.

The next moment the person who had saved him from the flames leaped out upon the stout limb, and, hand-over-hand, made his way toward the tree-trunk. Hardly had he sprung out from the window when the forked flames darted as in a vain attempt to seize a victim. Baffled and cheated, they hissed and roared like fiery serpents, while a shout arose from the group below as the young man and his rescuer reached the ground in safety.

The wooden building offered but a slight resistance to the flames, and but little effort was made to save it.

The most intense excitement reigned, and men rushed hither and thither, seeking a solution to the cause of the conflagration.

Fred had barely touched the ground when a figure stepped hurriedly toward him.

For a moment only did an object glisten in the person's hand; then followed a sharp, quick report and a bullet grazed Gordon's forehead.

The would-be assassin did not wait to ascertain the result of the shot, but turned quickly and fled into the dark shadows of a by-street and was lost to view before any one could start in pursuit.

The person was Jack Turner, and ten minutes afterward he was speeding away to the outlaw's stronghold to acquaint him with the result of the burning house and its intended victim.

"The captain's plan was a failure," chuckled the rascal as he sped along, "but my pistol finished him, and I'll claim a reward for that."

Fred turned to thank his deliverer and at the same time to discover who it was that had

risked his life in order to rescue him from the death which the scoundrel, Donald Stone, had doomed him to. A strange face met his gaze. A mass of shaggy gray whiskers almost covered the stranger's features, and a flowing mass of hair fell down upon the red shirt worn by him. A broad slouched hat partly imprisoned the hair and added to the person's wild appearance. Small, piercing black eyes, restless as the sea, peeped from beneath the shaggy eyebrows. A broad leather belt encircled his waist and held a slender but rusted dagger.

A pair of well-worn top-boots incased his feet. The toes were protruding from the torn boots that matched the tattered pair of pantaloons worn by the odd-looking creature. Even the red shirt was patched and torn, and barely covered the body of the strange individual.

As Fred turned to gaze upon his deliverer the odd personage removed his hat and bowed low to the young man and uttered a wild laugh.

"Ha! ha! ha! The fire didn't burn you. No, sir. The flames didn't scorch you. I wouldn't let them—no, sir!" Another peal of wild laughter burst from his lips and he continued: "I knew you were there and the fire was creeping toward you, so I imagined myself a squirrel and I flew up the tree and pulled you out, didn't I?"

"You have saved my life," replied Gordon, "and I am eternally grateful to you. How can I ever repay you, my brave fellow?"

Gordon extended his hand and the strange person eagerly seized it and wrung it cordially.

"You are the first one that has talked so kindly to me, and the first to shake hands with Crazy Luke. I'll not forget it—not forget it!" and the half-witted creature repeated the sentence over and over.

"Hurrah for Crazy Luke!" cried a miner, and the crowd burst forth into a deafening cheer.

"Young fellow, we're mighty glad you've got out of that scrape so easy, for you were in a tight fix and no mistake. Crazy Luke has saved your life, and hereafter any man that makes fun of the idiot or plays any tricks on him is a cur, and I, for one, will give him a lead pill out of my shooter—darn me if I don't."

The tall miner who had stepped forth and delivered the above speech was greeted by a loud shout and cries of approval.

In the meantime the flames had spread with wonderful rapidity, and the gambling-den and dance-house were a seething mass of flames and threatening to destroy the adjoining buildings.

The unfortunate creatures who had fallen in the bloody battle in the gambling-room were probably still in the burning building. Dead or dying they were left to their fate, for the flames drove back all who ventured within a dozen yards of the building fronting upon the street.

"Look here, mister," said the miner, who had championed the idiot, "my name's Tom Forbes, and I always help the weak side. Come, tell me how is it that you were left in that room up there?"

"I can relate all in a very few words. I have been the victim of a wily scoundrel. Scarcely a year ago, through his devilish ingenuity I lost one who was to have been my wife. The loss of the one I loved so well drove me into reckless deeds, and, seeking a change to obliterate scenes that were heavy with sorrow to me, I came to the silver regions and obtained a good position. I met this fiend, here in these very streets, and I listened to his smooth tongue and forgot the past. Little by little he lured me to the gambling-dens and brought me to the verge of ruin—almost made me a thief. To-night I discovered that the woman I love is still living, still true to me, and she is in that villain's power. Almost as soon as we met I was overpowered by the villain and his followers and bound hand and foot. He prepared a horrible death for me, but, thanks to my friend here, I have been snatched from the very jaws of death."

"You relate a very strange story," said Forbes. "You say that the girl is living and you saw her to-night?"

"Yes; but he has stolen her again. She lives and is still loyal to me, and that is sufficient. I'll track him to the end of the world if it is necessary. The world is not wide enough to hide him from me while Edwina is a captive in his hands," cried Gordon, vehemently.

"His name? who is the villain that has stolen her?"

"Donald Stone!"

A quick, low cry escaped from the lips of the idiot as Donald Stone's name was mentioned. Fred turned quickly to ascertain the cause of the demented creature's astonishment, but the

face of the maniac betrayed no emotion. It retained the same meaningless expression—the same vacant stare. If the features had momentarily shown the surprise occasioned by the mere mention of the outlaw's name they again became fixed in vacancy when the young man and the bystanders quickly turned.

"Donald Stone!" repeated Forbes. "The name is a strange one to me; never heard it before."

"That is strange, for the man I allude to almost dwells in this town. He was here among you, this very night. It was he that lured me into Poker Jack's den, and it was he that attacked me when the trembling girl flew into my arms for safety. It was he that abandoned me to the flames. He moves and dwells among you, and yet you do not know him."

Fred looked suspiciously at the tall miner. Forbes gave vent to a low whistle, and the light of the burning house casting a ruddy glare upon his features revealed a look of surprise upon them.

"I see—I see," he exclaimed; "I know the man now, but not by that name. Here, among us he is known as Walter Carson. So the fellow has another alias has he? He is a strange bird. Sometimes he is in town for a week at a time and then again he is absent for a long spell. I've noticed that a big robbery always takes place, either before or after he has lounged around the locality. He is looked upon as the pink of honesty by many, but I'll stake my life he is in league with that imp of the devil Wild-Fire, the rascal who proclaims himself the Boss of the Road. Many a treasure-box has fallen into the hands of that daring scoundrel, and I shouldn't wonder if Mister Walter Carson had got a share of it too. So, Donald Stone alias Carson is your man, eh?"

"Yes; he has again stolen the young woman from me and holds her in captivity."

Again the low cry—a muffled moan issued from the fool's lips, and he laid his hand upon the hilt of the rusted dagger.

"No matter what name they call him," he said apparently to himself; "I'll find him yet. Her blood is upon this blade and cries aloud for vengeance. Nero will know him if my eyes fail to recognize his features; he'll know him—he'll know him, for he has got more sense than Crazy Luke. Call him by whatever name you will he will yet fall into my hands and Nero will tell me if he is the man." Fred gazed upon the idiot as he uttered his threat and drew nearer to the poor fellow.

"Have you, too, a wrong that needs righting?" he asked.

"I have a wrong that nothing but blood—his blood—can wipe out. Not until his blood covers this rusted blade, and hides her blood from my gaze, can my wrongs be effaced. But where is Nero?"

The idiot placed a curious bone whistle to his lips and blew a shrill blast upon it.

A moment later and the deep bay of a dog resounded upon the outskirts of the crowd, and a huge mastiff bounded into the circle to crouch at the maniac's feet and lick his hands.

The beast glared upon the assembled group as if his strange master was in peril. A low growl came from its blood-red throat, and it exposed the gleaming fangs in a ferocious manner.

"No! no! he isn't here!" said the idiot, soothingly, as he patted the dog's head. "But, we'll find him yet. Patience, patience! We'll find him yet!"

CHAPTER V.

THE WOLVES OF SATAN'S GAP.

SURROUNDED by inaccessible rocks and masses of boulders was an open space deep in the very heart of the wild range of mountains where the outlaw band had selected the rendezvous and a permanent abode. Scarcely a quarter of a mile away to the north was the stage road leading to Helena. It wound along the base of the mountain, and then through a most gloomy canyon. Half-way through this canyon was a wide, deep fissure—a vast cleft in the rocky upheaval of the earth. A rude but strong bridge of logs and trees formed a bridge to cross this chasm, and over this structure the coach was compelled to pass in its journey to and from the mining towns. Black masses of rock towered high above the road, completely shutting out the rays of sunlight. A more desolate spot could scarcely be found, as no sign of life relieved the awful gloom and oppressive silence. Not a shrub or blade of grass made its appearance in the dismal precincts of Satan's Gap.

It was rightly named, for if the prince of

darkness ever frequented a spot it surely must have been the awful region named after him.

The open space referred to was on the summit of the rocks overlooking Satan's Gap and hewn out of the rocky mass by the hand of nature. It certainly resembled a giant citadel or fortress perched upon the peak of a mountain. From the "battlements" could be seen the gloomy gap far below, and a good view of the road was obtained in like manner.

The cunning mind that selected the spot knew full well that a handful of armed men could hold an army at bay from their citadel.

It was into this open space that Donald Stone had ridden when the outlaw sentry challenged him. In a harsh voice the ruffian gave the password.

"The Wolves of Satan's Gap!"

The faint moonbeams revealed the form of the sentry as he came forward to hold the bride while his chief dismounted.

Donald assisted Edwina from the saddle and led the way toward a dark cavity in the side of the rocky wall. A man came forth from the aperture bearing a blazing torch and led the way into the dark depths of the rock-bound cavern, followed by Donald and his captive. The remainder of the bandits dismounted and a few seconds later both men and horses had disappeared within hidden openings and a silence reigned in the space. No signs of life anywhere except in the figure hidden by a howler, who guarded the only entrance and who stood as if carved from the rock itself.

Donald passed through the first vaulted passage until he reached a large chamber; the guide fixed the torch in the side of the apartment and cast a few sticks upon the remains of a fire. In one corner of this chamber was a couch composed of furs and robes. Edwina walked to this, casting herself upon it and hid her face with her hands.

Donald did not notice his captive but drew near to the fire and flung his hat into a corner.

"Back again," murmured he, "and a tough night's work it has been too. I came near losing the girl and had a scrimmage with the miners. I had to turn down Poker Jack's shanty in order to destroy a dangerous rival. Get me a glass of brandy. I'm tired and thirsty."

The bandit who had preceded the outlaws into the cavern, advanced to a little cupboard constructed in the side of the rocky wall, and opening it he produced a bottle and a few glasses. Donald poured out a portion of the liquor and drank it.

"You say that you've had trouble to-night, captain?"

"Yes, lots of it!" responded the villain, "but, thank fortune it's over now and the girl is still in my hands."

Donald then gave his listener a graphic account of the night's adventure and the manner in which he had disposed of his rival. He had barely concluded when a slight commotion in the narrow passage was borne to his ears, and the next moment the well-known form of Jack Turner entered the chamber. This ruffian was breathless; he sunk down upon a keg before the fire and rested a few moments before he spoke.

"What's the matter?" demanded Donald.

"Matter enough, captain! The young feller that you tied up and left in the room to be burnt up, escaped the flames!"

Donald hurled the glass to the rocky floor, and an oath burst from his lips as the shattered vessel rattled upon the hard surface.

"You lie!" he fairly shrieked as he leaped to his feet, trembling with rage.

A glad cry escaped from the lips of the girl lying upon the couch as she heard the tidings of her lover's escape from the dreadful fate to which he had been doomed, and she clasped her hands in silent prayer.

"You lie!" roared Donald. "No human being could possibly escape from the fire, for I did not leave until I saw the flames leap upon him, fed by the oil which I threw upon him and the floor."

"Nevertheless, I say that he has escaped," reassured Turner, calmly. "I have just come from the burning house and saw him rescued."

"By whom?" thundered the bandit.

"By a crazy person—that wild-looking creature they call Crazy Luke."

"Curse him! Who is he?"

"I don't know. I have seen him of late loitering around the town, but I can't place his features, nor do I recollect ever seeing him before."

"Curse the fool! What induced him to enter that building and rescue the man I hate?"

Donald paced the chamber like a wild beast in its cage. He roundly cursed the idiot that

had foiled him of the satisfaction of knowing that Fred Gordon was a shapeless and charred mass in the ruins of the building.

A grim smile played upon Turner's lips as he beheld Donald's rage. He remained silently regarding the bandit as he paced to and fro, and finally exclaimed:

"What would you give if you knew he was dead?"

"I'm in no humor for joking!"

"I'm not joking. I'm asking you a fair and square question: what would you give if you knew he was positively dead?"

"Ask me for anything within the bounds of reason; but look you, Jack Turner, I'm in no mood for pleasantries, and beware how you trifles with me!"

Donald again resumed his measured tread upon the rocky floor.

"Would you give a thousand dollars?"

The outlaw stopped suddenly and faced Turner.

"Yes—a thousand dollars—gladly!"

"Then hand over the spondulix for I've fixed your man."

"What do you mean?"

"He had barely reached the ground when I darted forward with my pistol and let him have it, point blank."

"With what result?" cried Donald, eagerly.

"He dropped dead at my feet."

Edwina uttered a piercing scream, and sunk insensible upon the couch.

"You are positive that you saw him fall dead?"

"Yes, I'll swear to it!" replied Turner. "I knew you would feel pleased to know he was destroyed, so I took big chances by darting into the crowd and giving him the bullet, point blank."

Turner's eyes gleamed savagely as he spoke, and he noted with satisfaction the pleased look that swept over Donald's face.

"I had to run for it, captain. The vigilantes were at my heels, and gave me a lively chase."

The lying villain gave a thrilling account of a hair-breadth escape in order to convince the bandit chief of the magnitude of the daring deed he had accomplished.

"You are sure that Fred Gordon is dead?" Donald demanded.

"Yes; I saw him fall."

"Very well; the amount will be yours. Now for the cursed meddling fool who interposed in Gordon's behalf: do you think you would know him again? Strange that I have never met him during my frequent visits to Helena."

"I'd know him, captain, for he's the craziest looking specimen you ever saw," and Turner described the idiot minutely to the bandit chief.

Donald listened attentively and appeared much annoyed. Edwina revived and overheard the description given of her lover's rescuer, and she blessed him.

Donald walked to the cupboard and poured out another deep potion of the fiery liquid and imbibed it.

"Look you! This fool, idiot, or whatever you call him, must be destroyed. He may be in our way some future time."

Little did the road-agent dream what an important part the fool would play in the drama about to be enacted, and that he would meet the maniac at a critical point of the drama in question!

Donald murmured a few words to himself and again seated himself before the fire.

The outlaw who had entered the cavern in advance of the bandit leader remained a silent spectator and listener of the interview between Donald and Jack Turner.

He finally stepped forward and laid his hand upon the road-agent's shoulder.

"Captain! Do you forget that to-night the coach passes through the gap with a valuable treasure box and an armed escort?"

"Confound it! I had almost forgotten it. My mind was fixed upon the events of this night's adventure. Quick! Pass the word to the boys. Expect a stubborn resistance, for the treasure is a rich one and the armed escort are on the *qui vive* for the road-agents. They'll have to be mighty cute to evade Wild-Fire—"

"Or the Wolves of Satan's Gap," added Jack Turner, dramatically, and he bounded out of the chamber into a low and narrow passage close at hand.

Here, you Hank! Keep your eyes on the beauty yonder. Don't allow her to leave this place under any pretext. Now for business!"

Donald passed within a few feet of the couch and glanced at his captive, but she turned her face from him. The bandit uttered a light laugh and passed out from the chamber.

Hank sat before the fire and watched the reclining form upon the couch.

Edwina tried in vain to suppress the tears that welled up into her eyes. One moment her heart had rejoiced to hear of her lover's safety. The next minute she had been plunged into abject sorrow by Turner's words.

Outside of the road-agents' haunt the night was intensely dark, and the moon occasionally struggled to peep through the dark clouds that swept over her face.

Crouched among the giant boulders upon either side of the gap were motionless figures eagerly listening to the advancing vehicle.

"Sh! The coach is coming. Be on the alert. Remember the signal—'Wolves show your fangs!'" said a voice in hushed whispers.

Nearer drew the coach. The horses' hoofs sounded close at hand, and a dark mass moved toward the bridge, over the chasm. The next moment the horses were upon the bridge, and the lumbering vehicle rolled upon the structure. A moment later and the coach was in Satan's Gap.

The moon struggled through the clouds for an instant only, but in that brief interval it revealed the armed escort upon the coach and the gun-barrels protruding through the windows. Then dark forms issued rapidly from the boulders and leaped out into the roadway. The moon shone brighter, and revealed the figures distinctly. Each form had the hideous head and features of a wolf, and a brace of revolvers was grasped by each mysterious being.

CHAPTER VI.

THE NEW CAPTURE.

ALTHOUGH the armed escort upon and within the stage coach had been upon the alert and prepared to meet resistance in that dreaded locality, yet so sudden had been the attack, and aided by the intense gloom, that the weird-looking figures in the roadway had covered the armed men with their weapons. One look at the forms whose heads were incased in the masks formed of wolf-heads, and the driver reined in the horses with a cry of surprise.

"Wild-Fire's gang!" he gasped.
"Down with your weapons! The first among you that raises but a finger dies!" shouted a loud voice from beneath the repulsive mask. "You see we have the drop on you. Every man of you is covered by a brace of revolvers, and the persons inside of the coach are treated in the same way."

The road-agent's words were true in every respect, for each hideously-masked outlaw had singled out his man, and the polished tubes of the weapons were leveled direct at the person selected.

Even as the advanced figure concluded, a dozen of the same masked figures arose upon either side of the coach, apparently from the very earth itself, and the muzzles of their weapons actually peeped ominously into the windows of the coach. Silently and swiftly the road-agents had sprung upon their prey, and without the slightest resistance the coach and its armed passengers were at the mercy of the bold outlaws. It was evident that the controlling spirit of the robber league laid his plans skillfully, and his followers executed them with the precision of clockwork. The stage-coaches were never stopped in the same spot, therefore it was impossible to know when and where to look for the attack. The escort knew that Satan's Gap was the dangerous ravine, but as it was fully a quarter of a mile long it required constant vigilance until the dread regions were passed in safety.

The passengers had but time to observe the wolf-heads masking the features of the attacking party when the leader again spoke.

"Down with the treasure-chest and be lively with it! Cover every man, boys! Keep your fingers upon the triggers! Upon the least sign of treachery shoot and don't miss your man! Come, pay toll to the Boss of the Road! Wild-Fire never asks but once for the toll."

A moment later and the iron-bound chest was produced and handed down. Two masked figures seized it and laid it upon the ground. A third advanced with a heavy ax and struck the chest several blows, shattering the lock.

"Light! Examine the contents!" ordered the foremost figure.

A dark-lantern flashed its rays upon the box while an outlaw threw open the lid and exposed the contents of the chest to the surrounding group.

It was filled with small sacks of gold-dust and bars of metal.

"All right! No cheat about that! Drive on."

Remember you're not out of danger until you have left Satan's Gap far behind you! From every boulder a pair of eyes is watching every movement. Good-night, and remember your bloodless meeting with the Wolves of Satan's Gap."

The masked figure laughed gleefully and motioned the driver onward. The coach rolled along through the gap, relieved of its treasure-box. The wheels rumbled over the rough road and the coach was soon swallowed up in the gloom and the noise of the vehicle died away in the distance.

At the very first appearance of the wolf-masks and the shout of their leader, a portly figure had dropped to the ground from the rear part of the coach and now lay concealed behind a huge rock. This personage watched the group of bandits and to his consternation he saw one burly ruffian approach the very spot where he lay concealed.

Before the hidden watcher could crawl away in the darkness the advancing outlaw cast the rays of a lantern upon the boulder, and exposed the person hidden behind the rock.

"Hello! Here's somebody that wants to interview the Wolves!" exclaimed the bandit. Each masked figure drew a weapon, and the click, click of the triggers warned the discovered intruder that his hour was at hand.

"Oh, gentlemen—don't shoot! I was falled off dot coaches, unt I didn't know how to climbed on again."

The portly figure emerged from the shadow of the boulder, and came into full view of the outlaws. He started back as if in terror, and uttered a cry of alarm as he saw the hideous head and features of the wolf surmounting the shoulders of each armed person that surrounded him.

"Och! Himmel! Vot is dot? Oh, vot kind of peeples is dot? Mans mit wolf's heads on dem bodies. Och, dem vill eat me like a cat vill dem mouses!" and the German trembled and drew away from the road-agents.

"Who are you?" thundered the foremost fellow, his eyes gleaming through the apertures, and resembling the orbs of the savage animal whose head covered his face—a strange light of ferocity probably occasioned by the rays of the dark lantern, which flashed its light full upon the mask.

"Who I vos?" repeated the stout German. "I vos Dietrich Shuttleheimer. Who vos you, anyhow?"

"Silence! Do you know you are standing upon the brink of eternity?"

The fat German started backward, as if he had been standing upon dangerous ground, and exclaimed:

"Himmel, I didn't shoost know dat I vos standing on dot brink!"

"What are you doing here? Were you left by accident, or did you leave the coach intentionally?" fiercely asked the leader of the masks.

"No, sir! Der coach left me."

A low laugh came from the assembled group, and as they gazed upon the features of the frightened Dutchman they could discover no signs of the real emotion that was at that moment uppermost in the stout German's mind. He appeared terror-stricken, and trembling in every limb he sunk upon his knees, and his teeth chattered. The cause of his terror was the heavy revolver that was suddenly presented to his head by the chief of the Wolves.

"Down on your knees! In five seconds you're a dead man!" said the outlaw.

"Oh, Mister Wolf!" groaned the kneeling figure. "I don't got any grudges against you. I don't care if you vas robbed the stage coaches fifty times a day; vot is dot my business?—notings. I wish I vas a robber. By Himmel, I would rob pennies von a dead man's eyes. I vas yust so big a thief like all you gentlemen."

The bandits laughed, and the German, seeing the advantage thus gained, quickly followed it up.

"Yust give me a chance to rob somebodies, unt you vill see dot I can be yust so big a rascal like any von vot you are."

"Arise!" commanded the leader. "Now blindfold him and lead him into the prison-vault."

A bandit stepped forward and placed a bandage over Dietrich's eyes while another bound the German's hands behind with a stout piece of twine.

"Say, hold on! I can't vas see nottings!" protested Dietrich in a tone of perfect simplicity.

"That's all right! lead on!"

The masked figures moved toward the rock-bound citadel. Two of the outlaws conveyed

the chest while two more led the blindfolded Dutchman onward.

Dietrich kept up a continual flow of funny remarks while his guides led him over the rocky pathway, causing him to stumble and swear in German as he proceeded toward the bandits' retreat.

Even as he fell and pretended to hurt himself, the crafty German had managed to move the bandage in such a manner that he could obtain an occasional glimpse of the surroundings.

The outlaws entered the gloomy passage leading into the cavern retreat, and Dietrich found himself in the chamber where Edwina still reclined upon the couch. Something like a thrill of pleasure swept through the German's form, and he started visibly. Only for an instant, however, for the next moment he was calm and indifferent to the surroundings. Hank still lounged before the fire and looked up in surprise as the two wolf-masks led the captured Dutchman into the room.

The two masked outlaws retired and a few moments later Donald Stone entered the apartment.

Divested of the wolf mask the arch scoundrel entered the chamber and a grim smile played upon his features as his eyes rested upon the blindfolded Dutchman standing like a statue in the center of the vaulted chamber.

The bandit chief walked toward a small deal table and placed his two revolvers upon it and unloosened his leather belt.

"Hank! you will have a new boarder," said Donald. "When I return you can put him into that small chamber to the right and be sure he is secured. I'm afraid I've got an elephant on my hands."

"By Himmel, I wish I could get dis rag off von my eyes so dot I could see dot elephant on your hands—ha! ha! ha! Dot's funny—a elephant on his hands!"

Dietrich laughed heartily as he pictured the outlaw with an elephant on his hands. Donald walked slowly out of the chamber and Hank seated himself in such a manner that he could observe the Dutchman.

"Say, Hank! I want to talk some tings mit you."

Hank started in surprise as he heard the Dutchman call him by name.

"How did you know my name was Hank?" demanded the seated outlaw.

"Oh, Mister Wild-Fire told me dot Hank would look out for me unt Hank would look out for Miss Edwina too!" answered Dietrich.

Edwina looked up in surprise as she heard her name mentioned. She saw nothing in the red features and yellow hair of the Teuton to recall any previous meeting. Even as she looked toward the Dutchman she saw him walk toward the table.

"Now, look here, Hank; I wish dot my hands vas loose. I got a leetle bottle of visky in my pocket unt I bet dot you never drank sometings like dot. Hank, you like goot visky; I can toll dot by your nose, Hank."

Hank arose from his seat and approached the Dutchman. The excellence of the whiskey had excited his curiosity and before Dietrich had spoken a dozen words the outlaw had released the hands and the whisky-flask was eagerly seized.

Hank quickly sampled the contents of the flask and while he was thus engaged Dietrich walked toward the table. He made but one movement and that one movement was as rapid as the lightning's flash.

In that one movement he had seized both revolvers and they were concealed in his pocket. When Hank lowered the flask the Dutchman was standing immovable as a statue and at a respectful distance from the table. The movement had escaped the outlaw's notice, but Edwina had observed the act. Why did the prisoner seize upon the weapons of the bandit chief? Was he a friend or was he merely concealing the weapons for his personal advantage? Yet he had mentioned her name. How did he ascertain it?

Edwina pondered these questions over and over as she gazed upon the blindfolded figure.

Hank had barely time to return the flask to the German's waist-coat pocket when the heavy footfall of the outlaw chief resounded in the passage and Donald strode into the room. Would he discover the loss of his weapons?

CHAPTER VII.

ABANDONED TO A TERRIBLE FATE.

HANK did not have time to again bind the hands of the Dutchman and that individual placed his hands behind him in such a manner

that only a close observer would have noticed that the hands were untied and at liberty.

The road-agent entered the chamber and Edwina gave vent to a sigh of relief as she saw him pass by the table, never even once glancing toward it.

Hank had resumed his place before the fire and he hit into a huge piece of tobacco in order to conceal the fumes of the liquor. The occupants of the cavern were in exactly the same positions they occupied when Donald made his exit from the room.

The bandit paused a few moments near the fire and then approached Edwina. The young girl could see that the liquor had flushed the features of the robber and she nerved herself for the scene she knew was about to follow.

"I was called away from your side upon urgent business," said he, "but now the matter has been attended to and I am again at liberty to devote my attentions to you, Miss Carroll."

"You can spare yourself that trouble," replied Edwina, haughtily.

"Ah! Don't be so sarcastic! You forget where you are. You really forget that you are not in your own home, but in mine. But it will be yours also, for, as my wife, you will have to share my castle."

Donald drew still nearer to his beautiful captive, and essayed speaking in soft tones.

"You will learn to like me. I don't ask you to love me, because I know you have pledged your love to Fred Gordon; but he is dead. You must banish him from your thoughts, and devote them to me."

A bitter smile rested upon the girl's lips as she listened to the outlaw's words.

"I glory in the love I bear Fred Gordon, and my heart remains as true to it as the needle does to the pole. Never mention your name in the same breath with his, for his name is sacred to my ears, while yours awakens feelings of loathing."

"Heaven bless her!" murmured the Dutchman in a whisper.

Edwina's reply stung the outlaw to the quick, and his face plainly showed the rage that now swept through every fiber of his frame. His voice became husky, and he advanced toward the girl in a blustering manner.

"Enough of your insolence!" he cried. "I will stand no more of it. Guard your tongue well, and carefully avoid insults in your replies. I am in no mood to even listen to your sarcasm. I have wasted too much valuable time in trying to reconcile you. I have tried fair means, but hereafter I will use force if it is necessary."

"Coward. You threaten a woman who can offer but a slight resistance to your brutal language and strength. I have remained a prisoner in your hands for weary, weary months; but you will never subdue my spirit and gain my consent to link my fate with yours."

Edwina had risen from the couch, and stood, with features pale as the driven snow, before the road-agent, and the desperado quailed before her piercing eyes and imperious motion of her hand. For a moment he stood regarding the beautiful face of his prisoner; the next moment he had stepped forward quickly and seized her hand. In his anger he took the delicate hand and closed his fingers like a vise upon it.

Edwina uttered a little cry of pain and sought in vain to release the grasp.

That little cry had reached the ears of an anxious listener. The moment that she uttered the moan the Dutchman tore away the bandage from his eyes, and, like the leap of the panther he was upon the road-agent and with one effort he flung the bandit headlong upon the rocky floor. Hank leaped to his feet and Donald arose from the pavement with a bleeding gash upon his forehead. With a roar like that uttered by an infuriated bull the outlaw sprang toward the Dutchman, but as he reached forth his hands to seize the offender the outlaw was again sent down to the floor by a well directed blow from the Dutchman's fist. Donald was upon his feet again in an instant, and his hand sought his belt for his weapons. He remembered having laid them upon the table. He dashed toward it and an oath broke from his lips.

The pistols were gone!

"Confound it!" he roared; "where are my pistols?"

"Here!" shouted the Dutchman, and as he spoke he drew the brace of revolvers and leveled them full at the bandit's head.

Donald was rooted to the spot with surprise; he could not articulate a single word. Edwina uttered a glad cry and sprang toward the German as if her safety lay in that direction.

"Keep close beside me, miss," said the Ger-

man, in tones that thrilled her and almost forced another cry from her lips.

"Shoot! Hank! shoot! Why do you stand there like a mummy?" cried Donald.

"Silence!" hissed Dietrich. "Don't talk above a whisper or I'll let daylight into your skull. Move hand or foot, either of you, and you're both dead men."

Strange that the Dutchman had abandoned his dialect and spoke in a changed tone of voice but the two ruffians did not notice it. Their attention was riveted upon the deadly weapons that held them rooted to the spot and watching the fingers that rested upon the triggers.

It was a most thrilling scene.

A strange light suddenly shone in the outlaw's eyes. Something had sent a gleam of hope even as he stood before the weapons. The entire affair had transpired in much less time than it takes to describe the scene.

Even while Donald stood, apparently at Dietrich's mercy, several forms were quietly stealing into the room; several of Donald's ruffians appeared in a narrow passage directly behind the Dutchman. It was their coming that had sent the beam of pleasure into Donald's eyes. Quietly and quickly the bandits stole behind the man only to suddenly spring upon him, to pinion his arms and press him backward. A yell of triumph broke from the bandit chief as he saw the denouement of the affair.

"The tables are turned!" said he, as he bent over the prostrate figure and removed the weapons from his hands. "You won't have any further use for these, my fine fellow. I'll treat you to a death whereby you won't suffer very long at the climax but you'll suffer a thousand deaths before you're put out of your misery."

A second later and Dietrich's hands were secured. Donald turned to Hank.

"I'll settle with you for your carelessness," growled he; "I'll teach you to keep your eyes open in future."

"But, captain—"

"Not a word! It was your duty to see that the prisoner was secured and you have neglected that duty. As for you, miss," and Donald turned to Edwina, "you are not yet out of my hands. Your champion is in good keeping and you will not be troubled with his attentions hereafter."

Edwina attempted to reach the German and thank him for the desperate attempt he had made in her behalf but Donald anticipated the movement and prevented the meeting.

The German glanced toward the young girl and their eyes met. That one glance told more than words. It revealed volumes. But, before she could find the real solution to the mystery the Dutchman was forced out of the room by the ruffians, and Edwina, weeping, sought her couch of furs. Hank kept a strict watch over the poor captive. Donald's ruffians led their prisoner into a winding passage that opened into several smaller chambers.

The group finally entered a low vaulted room, and the light of the torch, borne by the outlaw in advance, revealed the dreary-looking place to the men and their prisoner.

Overhead the huge rock layers were interlocked in such a manner that one held the other in position.

Water trickled down from the dome of this cavern and the sides of the room were covered with a greenish slime.

In entering the place the outlaws had opened a door formed of heavy timbers—apparently the only entrance to the vault-like apartment.

"This is the place," said Donald. "This abandoned chamber will suit my purpose very well. The shock will bring down the bowlders and they'll form a tombstone for him."

The outlaws looked askance, and the bandit leader continued.

"I see you don't quite see through my plan, but you will, presently. My vengeance is quick and terrible. This meddling fool has pried into our secrets—discovered our retreat and actually sought to again steal the girl from my keeping. Roll out a keg of powder from our magazine! Lively there! and I'll treat you to a sight worth seeing."

A nimble desperado darted away in quest of the explosive.

If the German was appalled at the fate in store for him his face did not betray his feelings. He stood calmly regarding the road-agent, with a sneer upon his florid features.

"This fellow sought our retreat with a purpose in view. What that purpose was is of no consequence, for in ten minutes he will be launched into eternity in a most terrible manner," announced Donald.

The ruffian who had made his exit to obtain the powder now returned with a keg of the explosive and placed it upon the floor.

"What next, captain?"

Donald approached the doomed man, and in hissing tones he said:

"Do you not tremble? Do you not fear to meet death in the shape it is now prepared for you?"

The German bent a penetrating glance upon the ruffian, and then contemptuously turned his head away without deigning a reply.

The road agent's orders were quick and to the point, as he saw the prisoner turn away. He had hoped to see the doomed man sink upon his knees and beg for his life. But in this he was disappointed.

Donald withdrew the plug from one end of the keg and scattered a heap of powder upon the rocky floor. He then poured out several handfuls of the black compound and laid a train toward the door. He arranged this train so that it lead toward the heavy door and passed beneath it. It was arranged so that it could be fired after the door was closed, and the inflammable mixture would flash along toward the bulk in the keg. He next placed the keg in the center of the chamber, and several bandits forced the prisoner over the powder barrel, and by means of an iron ring fixed in the floor, Dietrich was secured in such a manner that he was fastened upon the keg and unable to move hand or foot.

"Now then! All leave this chamber. Now, my fine spy, say your prayers, if you know any. A speedy trip to the unknown land awaits you."

The road-agent and his bandits passed out of the room and closed the heavy door, leaving the helpless man bound upon the powder-keg.

Donald seized the torch, and stooping down applied it to the powder-train. A flash ensued and the train leaped forward like a fiery serpent.

CHAPTER VIII.

CRAZY LUKE'S DISCOVERY.

It will be remembered that Fred Gordon stood before the burning building intently gazing upon the demented creature known as Crazy Luke, and the idiot was speaking to the huge mastiff as if the brute understood every word uttered by its master.

Not long did the maniac remain with his dumb companion, but he again came toward Fred in a mysterious manner.

"You have lost one whom you loved? One for whom you would bear sorrow—one for whom you would lay down life itself? Ah! I know what it is to lose a treasure like that," said Crazy Luke in a tone of deep sadness, and he hastily brushed aside several tears that dimmed each eye. "But you can find her. Search! search! It is your only hope," and the idiot's voice suddenly arose.

"Why do you stand here while the lamb is in the fold of the wolf? Why do you stand here while she may be shrieking for help? Go! search Satan's Gap! It is there all evil spirits hold forth, and it is an evil spirit that has stolen your treasure. Follow upon the track and search Satan's Gap although you have to pull down every boulder in the accursed spot. She is there! She is there, and the fiend will not release her!"

A light suddenly broke in upon the young man. Forbes, the miner, had mentioned Stone's name in such a manner as to connect it with the bandits that infested the dreaded locality known as Satan's Gap. If Donald Stone was in league with the "Wolves" then it was very evident that he had borne away his prisoner to that rendezvous.

The idiot was right; that was the spot where he might hope to find his lost one. But, how was he to enter that den? How could he hope to penetrate its mysteries and discover if Edwina was really an inmate of the robber's head-quarters? Fred mentally asked himself these questions while the words of the idiot still rung in his ears. He knew that the coach would leave Helena shortly after midnight with an armed escort, for it bore away a valuable treasure-box. The coach would be compelled to pass through Satan's Gap.

Perhaps he could journey as far as the road-agent's haunts and there leave the coach and pursue his search?

In two hours the coach would leave and Fred resolved to carry out the plan he had hastily formed.

But he wisely concluded to reveal that plan to none save the idiot. He would first of all return to the office and restore the gold-dust

that he had obtained from the safe, and then pursue his intentions so hastily formed.

Fred called the idiot to his side, and thanking Forbes for his proffered assistance, he led the maniac away from the scene. The ragged creature followed him quickly, while the huge mastiff trotted at his heels.

When a short distance from the assemblage gathered about the ruins of the building, Fred paused and spoke to his strange companion.

"Luke, the advice you gave me is good, and I have resolved to follow it. I am going to Satan's Gap!"

"You will find her there. But you will also find the Wolves hungry and bloodthirsty. The way is filled with danger, but she whom you love is there. Go! go! Crazy Luke is your friend and advises you to go."

The idiot extended his hand and Fred grasped it and wrung it cordially. The next moment the fool had whistled to the mastiff and both dog and master suddenly disappeared in the gloom. Then Fred started toward the building where his employer's office was located and easily gained admission. A huge safe stood in one corner of the room, and having the combination Fred easily opened it and replaced the gold-dust which he had purloined but a few hours before at the instigation of Donald Stone. Having accomplished this he relocked the safe, extinguished the lamp which he had used, and fastened the outer door.

He wended his way toward a wooden building where he lodged, and once there he changed the damp and stained garments that he wore.

He had almost an hour and a half to spare before the coach would leave town, so he began preparations for the trip.

A large chest stood in one corner of the room, and from this box he produced a quantity of garments and selected some clothing. He stood before the small mirror with several brushes and tablets of paint, and at the expiration of an hour a transformation of the features had taken place whereby his most intimate friend would have failed to recognize him.

In the meantime, the idiot had stumbled along in the darkness, followed by his huge dog. About a mile from the town he bent his footsteps into a by-path among the rocks, and finally paused before a curious-looking structure built among the rocks. It was composed of several old packing cases, which he had probably obtained from the town. The cases were placed in such a manner that they afforded sufficient shelter to the demented being that lived and slept beneath them.

Several old battered tin cans formed his kitchen utensils, and from a secluded corner he produced a tin lamp, and soon illumined his strange abode with its feeble rays. A heap of leaves formed the couch for the idiot and his dog, and a few crackers and bones gave evidence of a recent meal. The dog entered the "apartment" and sought the furthest corner.

"Nero! you will have to occupy the parlor all to yourself to-night, for I'm going out. There's business on hand. I want you to sleep with one eye open, do you hear? If I'm not home in two or three hours, I want you to come and look for me, *same as you always do*."

The idiot spoke in a low, soothing tone, and the brute listened as if he understood the import of the maniac's instructions.

He extinguished the lamp, and again speaking a few words of caution to the mastiff, he strode away at a rapid gait toward the distant haunt of the Wolves of Satan's Gap.

Like a ghostly visitor from the other world the idiot flitted along, talking incessantly to himself, but in a hushed voice.

Midnight came and he traversed, until the dark precincts of the Gap hove in sight.

The moonbeams now and then sent slanting rays of silvery light across the path; but Luke seemed anxious to avoid it. He crept along in the gloom like an evil spirit, shunning the bright spots and selecting the dark. Finally his steps became slower, and he glided forward very cautiously. Suddenly he sunk to the earth, and crept on his hands and knees and peered over a large boulder that arose in his path. He gathered himself as if for a sudden leap. A slight pause and he darted forward, and the next moment he had borne a human figure down upon the rocky surface of the earth. His long fingers encircled the throat of the person he had overpowered, and his knees were planted upon the prostrate man's chest. It was the bandit sentry.

"Not a word, you whelp!" hissed the idiot, as his grasp tightened about the bandit's throat.

The desperado made several efforts to shake off his antagonist and call for help, but the idiot choked the cry in its very utterance.

"I'm a fool," said he, "but I know how to go to work when I have an object in view. Don't move, or I'll choke you dead."

There was no need of thus warning the prostrate sentry, for his struggles had ceased, and he lay perfectly motionless.

The maniac had strangled him! The strange being arose, and for a moment he stood gazing at the form lying motionless at his feet.

"He's dead," he chuckled; "I couldn't help it. He was in the way, and he'd kill me if he could. Ah! that's the way it is in this world; we're all taking chances. It's by mere chance that we succeed. Now—what next?" said he, musingly.

He again began creeping forward and crossed the open space leading to the series of hidden caverns in the mountain of rock. He flitted from boulder to boulder, searching for a favorable ingress. He had approached the Gap by a different route, and therefore a much more difficult one than that traversed by the stage line. When crazy Luke reached the summit of the outlaws' citadel, the stage-coach robbery had transpired fully an hour previous. The idiot continued his careful scrutiny of the surroundings. Everything was as silent as the grave; not a sound broke the quiet, save the distant hoot of an owl or the plaintive cry of a night bird.

Not a ray of light came from the Heavens upon the section of the Gap where the idiot was pursuing his investigations. He had reached a point of massive rocks overlooking the center of the Gap, when his attention was attracted by the low hum of human voices and a feeble ray of light that suddenly gleamed through the crevices in the layers of rock. He drew nearer, and sought a spot where he could obtain a view of the interior of the place reflecting the light.

To his astonishment he beheld a low cavern and a half dozen human beings flitting to and fro within it. An outlaw bearing a torch revealed the interior of the chamber to the hidden watcher. The sight that caused a slight exclamation to fall from the idiot's lips was the bound figure of the German in the act of being placed over the powder-keg and fastened to the iron ring in the rocky floor. The idiot saw the powder train upon the cavern's foundation, and a hoarse cry of fury escaped from him. He understood the situation at a glance. Scarcely had he noted the scene below when the outlaws strode out of the rocky chamber and closed the heavy door.

The idiot tore at the yielding rocks with desperation. He flung his tattered jacket into a pool of water near by and seized the wet garment in a frenzied manner. A cry of horror broke from his lips, for a flash appeared under the door. The bandit had fired the powder-train!

CHAPTER IX.

GOOD DOG.

CRAZY LUKE made a superhuman effort and dislodged several slabs of stone in such a manner that it made an opening large enough to admit his body. The next moment he had leaped through this aperture and was standing upon the cavern's floor. Not an instant too soon, for the fiery trail of powder was sputtering and flashing along the damp floor toward the bound man on the keg.

The idiot sprung forward midway between the victim and the door and dashed his wet jacket upon the powder train and flung himself upon it, crushing, smothering and scattering the trail that was leading the fiery serpent to a final explosion.

The flashing explosive hissed and struggled beneath the wet garment, but it failed to pass the barrier thus interposed.

The person bound to the keg was saved. A moment later and Crazy Luke was darting toward the German, and with his curious dagger he severed the ropes and drew Dietrich away from the keg.

"Now up through that hole you see there! Quick! quick! or you'll go through the roof helped along by the powder!" cried the idiot, wildly, as he pushed the German toward the hole in the side of the chamber. The German did not await the second bidding, but darted toward the exit made by the idiot.

Outside of the heavy door, but at a safe distance, stood Donald Stone and his ruffians awaiting the denouement to the thrilling scene he had inaugurated.

The outlaw stood at a respectable distance with a grim smile upon his face eagerly listening for the dull explosion that was to follow the firing of the power train.

Several seconds elapsed and a look of uneasiness stole upon the bandit's features.

Had the plan failed? Was the powder not fired properly?

No, said the ruffian in reply to his mental inquiries, for had he not fired the powder train himself and seen the flash?

Something was wrong, surely.

After a few moments of impatience he suddenly darted toward the door. All was dark within the cavern. Calling for the bandit bearing the torch he flung open the heavy door and held the torch in such a manner that it revealed the chamber.

A horrible oath flew from his lips. The cavern contained nothing but the keg and pieces of severed ropes. The doomed man was gone! The powder trail was scattered, half consumed.

Another exclamation of rage and blasphemy issued from the villain's lips as he discovered the hole in the wall of the cavern whereby his victim and his rescuer had escaped.

Donald Stone foamed like a madman. "After them! By all means capture the Dutchman, but use every exertion to catch the person that entered this cavern. He possesses our secret and it is safe to say knows our hidden retreat. Go! go! why do you stand here listening and gaping like idiots?"

With a hoarse cry Donald Stone clambered up the rocks and passed out through the aperture made by the maniac, followed by his confederates.

The bandit chief gained the open air and his eyes scanned the surroundings for some traces of the fugitives.

In the meantime Crazy Luke and his companion were soon without the cavern.

Both paused for a single minute to determine the next move.

"Which way now?" cried Luke. "Will you fly, or will you assist the woman whom he holds in his talons, as the hawk holds the little, helpless bird?"

"I will not leave this place until I make a final effort to rescue her," said Dietrich, firmly. The dialect was certainly far from German or broken English, but the maniac did not seem to notice the tone of voice or its accent.

"Then follow me," said he; "I'll show you the entrance, and while they are busy at the other end of their den we'll force an entrance into this part of it."

The strange creature—perfectly rational in his advice and plan—darted forward, closely followed by the stout German. A short run brought them to a low, round opening in the face of the towering rocks, and into this particular aperture the idiot sprang, followed by Dietrich. Both rushed onward quickly, but silently. A dozen yards brought them into the low vaulted passage, and then by a series of chambers the Dutchman led the way toward the room where Edwina remained closely watched by the ruffian known as Hank. It will be remembered that Dietrich, although apparently blindfolded, had observed the passages and gained a knowledge of the chambers. In a few moments he searched the rocky apartment. Hank still sat before the fire, and the effects of the liquor were causing the outlaw to nod and partially fall asleep.

With one quick bound Dietrich was at Hank's side, and one well-dealt blow sent the bandit sprawling from his seat.

Hank's cranium came in violent contact with the hard floor, and the senses were completely knocked out of his head. He lay passive and motionless, while the German quickly sprang toward Edwina.

The girl uttered a glad cry of surprise as her eyes rested upon her deliverer. She had just witnessed the scene where her champion had been led away to a speedy death; but his sudden appearance and escape from the murderous crew who had dragged him from the cavern was something beyond her comprehension. She uttered the glad cry that suddenly seemed to come from her very heart, and she looked at the German with eyes still dimmed with tears.

Why did she find her heart attracted toward this person? Why did her heart throb so wildly when her eyes looked into his? She could not find an answer to these queries, although she had sought one over and over again since the ruffian and his crew had led her champion away to the death threatened by the bandit leader of the league.

Again the glad cry issued from her lips as Dietrich sprang toward her and seized her hands.

"Trust me! Come with me! I am sent here by Fred Gordon," said the German, in quick sentences, and then he gently but quickly led her

from the cavern, while the idiot ran on in advance.

From the distant part of the chambers adjoining came the wild shouts of the road-agents whom Donald had delegated as pursuers. A hurried tramping of feet came from the various passages close at hand.

"Quick! Don't lose a moment or escape is impossible!" cried the idiot. "Hark! they're 'pon our track!"

Dietrich knew by the sound of many voices that the bandits had reached the chamber he had just escaped from, and they had discovered the absence of Edwina and also found the prostrate form of the sentry. The German hastened onward, and sought to speak encouraging words to the trembling girl at his side.

"Courage!" he whispered; "a few moments longer and we are out of these vaults."

"Now then, one more dash and we are safe!" cried the maniac, but, following the cheerful expression, came a hoarse cry of mingled rage and surprise from his lips, and without another word he climbed the side of the passage like a huge ape and disappeared in the gloom.

Dietrich started back nervously, and drew the girl toward him.

He saw the cause of the maniac's strange actions, and a groan of despair arose to his lips.

Standing directly in the narrow entrance, and barring all further passage, was the leader of the road-agents, Donald Stone, and behind him, with weapons ready for immediate use, were full twenty of his ruffianly followers.

Instinctively Edwina threw her arms around her champion, and a scream of agony burst from her lips.

Close behind them came the tramp of the remainder of the pursuers. They were hemmed in upon all sides! Before they could recover from their surprise the outlaw's hoarse voice rung through the arched passage:

"So you are not satisfied with escape and safety for yourself, eh? You must take my promised wife with you! Your race is run, and you have fallen out of the frying-pan into the fire."

Even as the bandit concluded a swarm of scowling ruffians was at the German's back, and, incumbered by the frightened girl, he was overpowered, and again a helpless captive in the hands of his merciless foe.

But, where was the idiot during this exciting episode? Crouching between the jagged rocks and viewing the scene from his elevated position.

His restless eyes wandered until they rested upon Donald's features. A muttered exclamation fell from his lips, but he stifled the words and clenched his hands, wildly.

"It is he!" he murmured. "But, Nero will tell me if I am right or wrong."

He watched the outlaw group bearing away their prisoners until the torch faded away in the gloom of the passage. He then descended and made his way toward the exit. He peered out into the night and paused.

"It won't do to leave him; but I must follow a different plan; the odds are too much for us. I've got to rack my brains—brains! Have I got any? They all say I'm a fool. I'm Crazy Luke, I don't know anything. I'll show 'em some day whether I'm as big a fool as they think I am. Oh! if this should be the man? If this should be the one I am tracking! But, Nero will be sure of it. He's got more sense than I have. I haven't got any at all. I'm crazy! I'm a fool, he! he! he!"

The idiot suddenly checked his outburst of laughter.

"Somebody might hear me," he muttered, "and then I'd be prevented from helping my friend."

He passed out into the gloom of night and made his way toward the portion of the rocky wall where first he had seen the ray of light through the rifts in the rocks.

He determined to seek an entrance to the cavern from that point.

The moon occasionally shone through the mass of clouds but the shadow of the towering rocks presented a safe passage toward the abandoned cave where the German had so narrowly escaped a fearful death.

The idiot reached the spot where he had thrust aside the rocks and was in the act of passing into the aperture when he was suddenly seized by a pair of hands and borne backward upon the ground and the cold muzzle of a pistol was pressed to his temple. Quick as the flash of the electric fluid the maniac thrust aside the weapon and seized the hand that held it.

Next, he uttered a peculiar cry or whistle, that rung out upon the still night air, and awoke

the echoes far and near. A dark form came bounding through the gloom.

There was a sudden rush—one spring accompanied by a growl, and the outlaw that held the idiot was torn from the prostrate form and the fangs of a huge beast was fixed in his throat.

It was the idiot's dog—the huge mastiff, and he was tearing the fallen outlaw in a terrible manner—like a famished tiger rending its prey.

CHAPTER X.

A CRITICAL MOMENT.

WHEN the would-be-assassin sprang forward to attack the idiot he had thrown aside the wolf-head which he wore, and thus disincumbered of the mask, he nimbly leaped upon the person who was about to enter the aperture.

The huge mastiff now stood above the bleeding mass of humanity and at a low call from its master it came toward him leaving the mangled outlaw reluctantly.

"Sh! let him alone," said the idiot, in a low tone. "He won't do any more mischief. Come, let us get him out of the way."

Crazy Luke raised the body and bearing it toward the verge of the cliff he first removed the peculiar coat worn by the dead man and then pushed the dead corpse from the awful heights. Both dog and man listened from the brink of the cliff as the corpse shot downward into the intense gloom below.

It was a strange sight to see the weird figure leaning over the towering rocks awaiting some sound from the gloom beneath.

A dull thud came from the black gulf. A grim smile played upon Crazy Luke's features as he heard the sound.

Then the slayer withdrew from the verge of the cliff and placed the dead man's coat upon himself.

Several rods away from the spot where the encounter had taken place he found the revolver, and further on, the curious mask worn by the bandit.

It was the head and features of a gray wolf, or rather the skin of that animal mounted upon a frame-work of cloth and pasteboard.

It covered the face, and the loose skin falling over the head and neck completely masked the person who wore it.

Two eye-holes enabled the wearer to see distinctly and also breathe with ease.

The idiot placed the mask upon his face and then spoke a few words to the mastiff:

"Nero, you must get out of this space, but I want you to prow! around in the neighborhood. You know what I'm saying, don't you? Now go, and mind that you keep your ears open in case I call you again."

The intelligent animal seemed to understand what was required, for, uttering a low whine, he disappeared in the shadows.

"There's no use talking; that dog's the wisest animal on the face of this earth. He understands Crazy Luke, and obeys his wishes. Poor Nero! If anything should happen to me what would he do?"

A form suddenly emerged from the rocky wall directly opposite, and approached the idiot.

"Murray, is that you?"

For a moment Crazy Luke hesitated before making any reply.

"Yes; what's the matter?" he demanded.

The mask he wore muffled his voice, and the approaching bandit apparently did not discover the trick. So far Crazy Luke was safe in the character he had assumed.

A moment later and the new-comer was close at hand, and he halted.

"What are you doing with your mask on you?" asked the bandit, pleasantly.

"Oh, I kept it on, just for deviltry. I'm on post to-night, and I found it easier to wear it than carry it or bring it into the cavern."

The idiot spoke at random, but, strange to say, the explanation was perfectly satisfactory to the bandit, who did not dream of the daring cheat thus perpetrated upon him.

"What's the captain going to do with the Dutchman?" Luke inquired.

"Oh! he'll give us a treat, no doubt. The captain is a great hand to originate sensational things to please the boys. But, Murray, between you and I, I think the captain's a little gone in his upper story. He's fooling valuable time away on that girl that he's got in the caverns. You know that our business motto is make hay while the sun shines. We made a big haul to-night, but the chances are we won't make another in a hurry. Now, you see, while the captain's brain is full of love and beauty he

can't plan as he'd ought to. A man in this business wants a clear head and no anchors around his neck. The robbery to-night will raise a breeze in Helena, and you bet, the next treasure-box that leaves the town won't fall into our clutches as easy as this one did. If Captain Wild-Fire wasn't getting love-sick and soft-headed, he'd be in Helena to-night and get the 'points' for the next move."

Crazy Luke listened attentively to the bandit's revelations, and now and then grunted an approval.

"What do you think of it?" said the road-agent.

"Same as you do!" replied Luke.

"I tell you what it is, Murray, while Wild-Fire tended to business he was truly the Boss of the Road. Not a single treasure-box escaped the Wolves of the Gap. But see! this is the first one in two weeks when we might have had several more. He's kept this girl captive in these regions just long enough to lose his brain. I tell you he's losing ground with us, and you needn't be surprised if we oust him out of the league and put some one in his place who will work better for the interest of the Wolves."

Here was an open rebellion in Wild-Fire's camp, and that fearless ruffian was even now in danger of being deposed or destroyed by the lawless men he ruled and whom he had ruled like a tyrant. While he led them on to spoils they submitted gracefully, but now that his love-making interfered with the "business" of the league, he was in danger of being exterminated by his "Wolves."

Crazy Luke coincided with everything said by the bandit and appeared to join heartily in the mutiny.

Thanks to the mask that the idiot had placed over his head and features, he escaped detection in voice and appearance.

"Keep mum about what I've told you, Murray," warned the bandit. "We want to know who to be sure of before we make a move—savez?"

"Correct!" replied Luke. "But am I to be relieved to-night?"

"Yes, I'm out here for that purpose. I thought you knew that. You're getting absent-minded, ain't you?"

"Yes. It's lonesome out here, and I'm apt to get absent-minded," confessed the maniac in a rational manner, and perfectly at home with his unsuspecting listener.

"Don't stay out here too long," said the outlaw; "take off that mask when you go in. Keep mum about the racket we're fixing up for Wild-Fire."

Without another word the bandit sentry strode along toward the point he was to occupy during the remainder of the night.

Luke watched the retreating figure and carefully noted the spot where it halted, and then walked slowly toward the outlaws' retreat.

"So, Mister Wild-Fire, you're losing ground, eh?" muttered the idiot, as he moved toward the secret entrance. "That's good news; the vigilantes will have easy work if that's the case."

Luke found the low opening from which the bandit had just issued, and the next moment he had passed into the tunnel-like entrance.

A faint ray of light appeared in the distance, and Luke knew that within a few minutes he would again be in the presence of some member or members of the fraternity of desperadoes. If he removed the mask he would surely be discovered, and if he retained it he would excite suspicion.

While thus hesitating he chanced to glance to the left of the passage, and in a species of alcove he saw the hideous masks of the outlaw brotherhood deposited upon rocky shelves. Scarcely knowing why, he seized one of the masks and quickly bore it away toward the open space outside of the cavern.

Carefully he crept along and deposited the fantastic mask behind a large rock, and quickly returned and again went forward through the passage.

The low hum of voices came from the vaulted chamber directly in advance, and Luke knew a crisis was at hand. A few steps further on and he saw the boisterous group that had first attracted his attention. They were seated around a small table engaged in throwing dice for sums of money that lay scattered upon the rough table. Several bottles served to show the real cause of their hilarity.

They were divested of their masks and their features were plainly visible as they sat beneath a swinging lamp. Even as Luke discovered the group several of the assemblage looked up and espied the masked figure.

"Hello! Here's Murray!" said one of the play-

ers. "Come, pard; you're just in time. Only five dollars ante and three fives to beat."

It was an unexpected invitation, and Luke scarcely knew what to say.

"Wait till I take off my mask," said he, turning to depart.

"No matter about that; come on, we're waiting for you," said the desperado at the table. "Put up your shekels and take hold of the box!"

Unconsciously Luke slipped his hand into the coat pocket of the garment he wore, and which he had removed from the dead bandit, and his fingers came in contact with a small sack which he rightly assumed contained gold-dust. He approached the table, and laid the little bag upon it, and seized the dice-box. He rattled the dice in their leather sheath and rolled them out upon the table.

"Three sixes!" roared the bandit. "There's luck for you. Scoop it in, pard!"

Luke gathered in the amount upon the table, and the ante again was advanced for another trial.

"He wears the mask for luck!" roared the desperado at the head of the table, and after quaffing from the bottle, he seized the dice-box and again invoked the fickle goddess.

"That's so. If he wins this time he'll have to take it off," cried another.

"Good! good!" yelled the group, ready for any suggestion.

A new danger had suddenly arisen. Of course there were ninety-nine chances out of a hundred that Luke would not win, but if he did he would be compelled to remove the mask, and then—what?

A desperate struggle for life and liberty. It would never do to refuse unmasking, and the strange creature seemed to realize his peril, for his hand trembled as he placed the amount of money upon the table.

The outlaws began to play. One after another cast the dice upon the boards, and boisterous laughter followed the small counts, while cheering expressions greeted the more fortunate members of the group.

"Now then, Murray! Grab the box and let's see what kind of luck you'll have this time. Here's my regards," and the road-agent again emptied the bottle of a copious draught.

Luke took the dice-box in his trembling hand and hesitated a moment. The highest count was sixteen. Upon the casting of the dice his very life hung. His life was the stake!

If he could but manage to throw the accursed pieces of bone in such a manner as to register a low count he would be safe.

A quick short movement of the three dice and he cast them upon the table.

"Hell and furies! Three sixes again!" roared the group as they bent forward to ascertain the result.

Before Luke could stir hand or foot a hurried footstep sounded in an adjoining passage and a hoarse cry arose as if from many persons in quick pursuit.

The next moment the figure of Dietrich, the German, bounded into the room.

Luke seized a bottle from the table and hurled it at the swinging lamp, smashing it, and plunging the chamber in darkness.

CHAPTER XI.

THE OUTLAWS' HIDEOUS CRIME.

DONALD STONE and his followers entered the cavern with the German in their midst. The road-agent was in high glee and a demoniacal expression rested upon his evil countenance as he reached the central chamber.

"Bind him hand and foot. Do not leave the slightest chance open for escape. Where's Hank?"

"Laid up. He's got a tough blow on top of his head. He hasn't come to yet," responded a bandit.

Donald's rage was something terrible to behold. He cursed the assembled group for their lack of vigilance. He knew that some one had aided the prisoner's escape and thus prevented the consummation of his well-laid plan. The manner in which he had bound the German to the powder-keg and laid the train could not possibly fail to accomplish his purpose unless aided by a traitor among the men he commanded, or by some outside friend. Who was it? Who was the person that had foiled him? Donald found no satisfactory reply to these questions.

He contented himself by ordering the German bound in such a manner that he could not move.

Then the road-agent looked scornfully at the helpless man and spurned him with his foot.

"You dog! I'll teach you a lesson that you'll

remember until you're launched out of this world. Rest easy until morning, and then you'll take a walk out of this sphere, mighty lively."

Donald saw that Edwina was again placed in her apartment and posted several of his confederates to guard the two passages leading into that particular cavern. He attended to the details in person and then returned to the chamber where the German lay upon the rocky floor.

Donald had resolved to force a confession from the lips of his captive and thus discover who it was that had aided him to escape from the abandoned vault. First he drew a brace of pistols and then summoned several of his followers. He approached Dietrich and in a harsh tone of voice addressed him.

"You've had an accomplice to aid you to escape. No living man could possibly escape from that cavern bound as you were to that keg by the iron ring and the powder train actually fired. Now I have made up my mind to know who it was that aided you. Don't try to evade this question for I'll have an answer if I have to put you to the torture and rack every bone and muscle in your body."

The German made no reply; in fact he did not raise his eyes to see who it was that addressed him.

"Did you hear me speak?" thundered the outlaw chief.

"Was you talking mit me?" asked Dietrich calmly as he met the gaze of the ruffian.

"Yes; who was your accomplice? Give me his name."

"Vot is dot—accomplices?"

"Confound your stupidity!" cried the impatient villain. "Who helped you?"

"I always hellup mineself!"

"Your fool's reply will not avail you. I know that some one cut the ropes and helped you through the hole made in the side of the cave. Who was it?"

"I don't was know. I didn't see nobodies."

"Here! Several of you take down those ropes and string him up by the thumbs. I'll bet that will soon bring him to his senses," cried Donald.

Two road-agents unfastened ropes that were attached to the roof of the cavern, and allowed them to fall to the floor in such a manner that by seizing one end of the rope the other end could be drawn upward, thereby elevating whatever might be attached to the other strand. A moment later and Dietrich's hands were released, and in turn they were fastened to this rope.

At a signal from the outlaw chief the German was hauled upward until his feet were a few yards from the rocky floor.

"Now, my fine fellow, if you don't unloosen your tongue I'll put weights to your feet, and you'll be mighty glad to confess before many of them are attached, I can tell you."

"All right; let me down; I will tell you all about it," said Dietrich.

The German was lowered to the floor.

"Who was it?" demanded Donald, impatiently.

"Dot feller vot you call Hank!"

"Hank a traitor!" shouted the bandit leader. "I thought so. He dies!"

By this falsehood Dietrich imperiled the life of a human being; but was not his own at stake? And was not the entire league his enemies? He had escaped the dreadful torture that Donald would surely inflict upon him, and also concealed the fact that Crazy Luke was at that moment in the vicinity of the robbers' caverns.

"Release him from the rope," said Donald; "and mind you put Hank into a safe place. You know the fate of traitors?"

"Death!" yelled the villainous crew.

"Yes, and a speedy one," added Donald. "I am convinced that Hank is a traitor and connived at his escape, for I left him bound securely, and when I returned my pistols were gone and the Dutchman's hands were free; and now his confession settles all doubts that were in my mind. Hank dies."

Again was the German secured, but the bandits were listening so eagerly to Donald's words that they accomplished their work in a bungling manner, and Dietrich placed his hands in such a manner that one of them was almost free from the thongs.

In more respects than one Donald's plan of putting the German to a torture test had proved, so far, highly beneficial to the Teuton.

In the excitement, the imperfect tying was not noticed, and Dietrich groaned as if the thongs were cutting into his wrists. The outlaws cast him upon the floor in a rough manner.

"Lay there a few hours," growled Donald, "and picture to yourself the most horrible death you can imagine. That will be your death for I will rack my brain to find a novel and hideous one for you."

"Much obliged mit you," answered the German. "Don't be in a hurry about dot."

"Enjoy yourself if you can," said Donald savagely, "for I can assure you that you'll face death in a terrible form."

"All right, he ain't afraid of me," responded Dietrich calmly.

"Watch him. Don't leave this chamber for a moment. Your lives are responsible for his safe keeping."

"All right, captain!"

The outlaw chief strode out of the cavern and sought his own quarters. A comfortable couch stood in one corner of the small rock-bound chamber, and a rough table and several boxes comprised the furniture. Stacks of firearms lay in all corners as if the outlaw had selected the chamber at once for his sleeping apartment and armory. A large chest occupied one corner of the room. A few shelves lined the rocky wall and upon the topmost was the mask worn by the "Boss" of the Road.

A swinging-lamp shed its fitful glare upon the surroundings, and a beholder would have been transported to the rock-bound den of the buccaners of old instead of the modern retreat of the latter-day road-agent.

The reign of the knights of the road is short but terrible in its sway. Until the outraged community arises in its might and lynch-law is meted out to the daring outlaws, they continue to spread terror and dismay in the new regions and are never driven from their strongholds without a terrible conflict and loss of life.

Donald sat down for a few moments, and after a short rest he approached the chest, opened it, and took from its depths a small package, and bringing it to the table he unloosened the bindings.

"It strikes me that I have a valuable document here," said he, "and when my sway becomes shaky, and these regions too hot for me, it will become me to seek other pastures. I have laid up a goodly sum, and can live at my ease for the balance of my days. With Edwina as my wife, I will leave America, and seek to forget my old associations. This paper will bring me a small fortune. It is my uncle's will. He left the bulk of his property to my sister. In case of her death it was to be mine. She married. That came very near upsetting my calculations, for I was deeply in debt. If she had children, that would surely dash my hopes to the ground. I studied everything carefully, and resolved that neither she nor her children should stand in my way to the fortune I needed so badly. I lost heavily at the gaming-tables, until I was reduced to beggary, and she, thinking to reform me, denied me the smallest amount that I begged for. What was to be done? Inflamed by wine, I forced an entrance into her apartment, and seizing a dagger that I had found, I sunk its blade into her heart. I seized everything of value that I could find. Found the will, and made a dash for liberty. Before I could reach the lawn, a huge dog sprang at me, and a fearful encounter took place. Fortunately, I seized a huge stone, and battered the brute's head, until he released me and sunk apparently lifeless upon the ground. I secreted the will and valuables, and then gave the alarm. Neighbors flocked to my assistance, and we searched far and near for the supposed robbers and assassins. I flew into fits of grief, and acted my part so well that I really excited sympathy. I was compelled to chain the mastiff, as the creature made several attempts to leap upon me in its blind fury."

As a matter of course the assassin was never discovered. The grief-stricken husband arrived after his wife had lain under the sod several weeks, but in that space I had filed my claim and then disappeared from the neighborhood. My sister's husband was almost crazed by the occurrence, and he, too, disappeared from the vicinity. Is it fancy or is it real that I am tracked by an avenging Nemesis? The spirit of my murdered sister, and the form of her husband with the curious dagger grasped in his hand seem waiting the chance to deal out retributive justice to me. They seem to follow wherever I roam. Even here, in the wilds, surrounded by my lawless crew, I start and shudder at every shadow that crosses my path, and I dread to be alone with my guilty conscience."

As the blood-stained ruffian concluded his review of the past, he drew the document from the package, and as he did so a photograph fell to the floor.

Donald shuddered and drew back from it as if a deadly reptile had stung him. It was the picture of the sister he had murdered, and the features were turned toward him, and a voice seemed to shriek in his ears: "Murderer! your hour is at hand!"

CHAPTER XII.

OUT OF THE MESHES.

THE road-agent started convulsively, and turned as if the voice had issued from the lips of some one at his side.

It was the voice of his conscience that thus terrified him, and as he realized that he was absolutely alone in the small cavern his fears passed away and his features wore a calm expression. Like men of his class, he was really a craven at heart. Yet this same ruffian had plunged foremost into a conflict and fought like a tiger when surrounded by his league. He had performed prodigious deeds of valor before he had been selected ruler of the band that infested Satan's Gap.

Donald had "killed" his man in many bar-room encounters. He was a quick shot with the revolver and a most dangerous customer with the bowie. His reckless encounters and apparent bravery had won for him the position of chief. He did not lack bravery when his "Wolves" were near, or when a foe faced him. Yet he trembled when alone—trembled when he thought of his guilt, and shrunk from its memories.

He stooped down and picked up the fallen portrait, and with unsteady fingers replaced it within the documents. He wondered how it found its way among the papers forming the package. He did not examine the remainder of the documents but again replaced them within the chest. He almost felt sorry that he had brought them out from their resting-place. His mind next reverted to his prisoners. He would mete out a terrible fate to the German; and as for Edwina, he would lose no time in making her his wife by any means which the situation would require, and thus settle the two questions uppermost in his mind.

"It was not wise for me to remain away from Helena, to-night," he muttered. "I should have mounted a fleet horse and rode into town. My absence, in a night like this, will connect me with the robbery, but what do I care? An army couldn't dislodge me from this stronghold, and as for the vigilantes, I'll teach them to give Wild-Fire a wide berth in the future."

He flung himself upon the couch and tried in vain to close his eyes in sleep. He lay tossing until the gray dawn appeared in the eastern skies and yet sleep had not visited his weary lids.

In the meantime, Dietrich lay upon the rocky floor, while, several yards away, two armed bandits carefully watched the captive. Outside of the chamber was a wide passage, and in this open space a group of outlaws sat about a rough table engaged with the dice-box, and risking sums of gold-dust and money upon the result. Their boisterous laughter reached the ears of the two bandits guarding the prisoner, and their eyes often turned toward that direction as if they longed to join the merry group.

"By Jove! this is lonesome work," said the stoutest of the two, after a long silence.

"Yes, and all useless! The prisoner is tied so he can't move a finger, and I don't see why we should rob ourselves of a little sport. As if any one could reach him without attracting our attention! And who's to do it, any way?"

"That's so!" replied the stout bandit. "I tell you what we'll do. We'll take turns in watching. You go and play for a short time and then let me go. In that way the night will pass pleasantly and perhaps—profitably."

"That's so."

During all this time the German lay apparently asleep, and once during a lull in the conversation he snored like a diminutive saw-mill in full blast. The two bandits listened and the younger of the ruffians said in a hushed voice:

"Did you hear that?"

"Yes; he's sleeping," was the reply.

"Don't you think he's playing 'possum?"

"No; and if he was, what difference does it make? He's tied up like a chicken for the oven. He's asleep, you can bet on it, pard!"

As if to add a convincing proof of the outlaw's assertion the German snored still louder and murmured in his sleep.

This seemed to remove all lingering doubts in the minds of the two and they felt sure the prisoner was in the land of dreams.

The youngest arose and passed out to the open space in the tunnel-like passage, where his brother ruffians were engaged with the dice-box.

During the time that the remaining bandit

mounted guard Dietrich kept him in full view through his partially closed eyes. Perhaps an hour thus passed and the frequent bursts of laughter and the sound of coin as it changed hands caused the sentry to become restless and impatient. He walked toward the opening to obtain a view of the jolly gathering.

In the twinkling of an eye Dietrich had slipped his hand out of the thongs but lay still as death when the outlaw turned again to resume his vigil. The next time that the road-agent paused to obtain a glimpse of the gamblers, Dietrich was busy at work unfastening the rope that bound his feet. Thus did he watch every chance and by degrees untied his bonds, but yet remained perfectly still.

The unsuspecting bandit saw nothing in the captive to excite his attention. His mind was fixed upon joining the laughing and drinking group outside.

"Hello, there Stevens! How long are you going to stay?" he finally exclaimed, in a loud voice.

Stevens replied and in a few moments entered the chamber to relieve his comrade. The German could see that Stevens had undoubtedly imbibed considerable "mountain dew" since he had left the apartment, for his step was slightly wavering and his tongue was thick.

"All right, old fellow!" said he. "I've made a good stake. Go out; I'll look after the prisoner. Has he woke up yet?"

"No! He sleeps as if he was dead," was the reply. "Now you keep a strict watch while I'm gone, for if anything was to happen the captain would give us home-made thunder!"

"All right! go ahead! I wish you luck," rejoined Stevens.

The stout bandit left the chamber and joined the players.

Stevens watched the group from the entrance and now and then cast his eyes toward the figure upon the floor but it was evident that his thoughts were on his confederates and not upon the man he was guarding.

It was about this time that Crazy Luke entered the space where the outlaws were busily engaged and joined the group of players.

Stevens finally seated himself upon a projecting rock, facing the captive. His head began to drop downward, and his eyes closed, although he made several futile efforts to keep them open. He nodded and his head dropped lower.

This was the chance that Dietrich had waited for and the only chance that would occur.

Quick as thought he was upon his feet, and then, like a shadow, he glided toward the sentry, seized a rifle that lay beside the sleeping bandit, raised it aloft and brought down the stock upon his head.

It was a terrific blow, and the dozing outlaw sunk without a groan to the rocky floor.

Dietrich then turned to flee.

Bewildered by the several passages that presented themselves to his view he darted into the very one leading toward the group at the table!

Almost at the same moment several forms appeared from a distant opening and obtained a glimpse of the escaping prisoner.

One hurried glance and they understood the situation, and uttering a hoarse shout, they dashed in pursuit. Dietrich fled onward, and a few rods brought him into the presence of the astonished bandits.

Before they could fully realize the sudden interruption, and obtain a good view of the German, the lamp was dashed into fragments and an impenetrable gloom enveloped friend and foe.

Dietrich felt his hand grasped and a familiar voice rung in his ears: "Follow me! Don't let go of my hand."

Crazy Luke led the way rapidly through the dark passage, while the shouts of the outlaws echoed through the arched chambers as they stumbled here and there madly shouting for a light.

Crazy Luke made good use of this respite, and both he and the German had gained a long distance before a torch was procured and lighted.

Then came the howling bandits like a legion of fiends loosed from the infernal regions.

"Hurry up!" cried Luke; "once outside and we are all right. Come on! I know the way, and we've got a good start."

Several turns in the passage brought the fugitives to the exit, and a moment later they had reached the open air.

"This way—this way! I hid something here that will be useful to me now," cried Luke, as he dashed among the boulders. He ran along as if searching for a particular spot, and finally stooped down and took out an object from the

rocky mass. It was the wolf-mask that he had concealed there a few hours previous.

"Put this on! Quick!" he cried, in a subdued voice, as the shouts of the pursuers rung out on the night air.

He placed the mask upon the German's head, and then dashed into the jagged masses of rock rising like battlements and overlooking Satan's Gap!

The voices of the pursuers echoed from all quarters of the compass, and served to accelerate the movements of the two fugitives. Crazy Luke leaped from rock to rock, followed by his companion, until they had reached a precipitous portion of the Gap. The idiot suddenly paused.

"Look out for a sentry somewhere about this—"

"Halt! Who goes there?" said a voice proceeding from the gloom.

"The Wolves of Satan's Gap," replied the idiot, speaking in a muffled voice.

"What's the racket up there?" demanded the voice.

"One of our prisoners give us the slip. We're making for the point in the Gap where he'll be likely to try and get out. Watch this place! Come along, Murray!"

The idiot spoke hurriedly and dashed past the sentry, closely followed by the German.

A few moments later and Jack Turner, followed by several bandits, leaped toward the sentry, and Turner exclaimed:

"Did two men pass you?"

"Yes! They gave me the pass-word!"

"Fool! You've been tricked! Those were the very two men that we're after!"

CHAPTER XIII.

TAKEN.

THE news of the coach robbery and the loss of the treasure-box, although guarded by an armed escort, created the wildest excitement in Helena. The escort was condemned, and various rumors circulated concerning the cowardly manner in which they had allowed the road-agents to surprise them and steal the treasures. Some even hinted that the escort was in league with the robbers.

A meeting of the few brave spirits who had formed themselves into a vigilance committee took place the very next day, and Forbes the miner guaranteed the aid of a dozen brave men to aid the committee in purging the regions of the desperate gang that infested it.

"Furthermore," said Forbes, rising in his seat, "we'll have to strike at the head and front of this gang before we can rid the locality of them. I have my eye on the leader. This Wild-Fire is known to me—at least I suspect his identity."

"Who is it?" asked several.

"Walter Carson! A man who comes and goes out of town with a price on his head and yet we fail to recognize in him—the scourge of the regions—Wild-Fire!"

A low hum of surprise arose from the assemblage. The person known as Carson had ingratiated himself in the good graces of the leading men and they were slow to believe that he could be the desperado, Wild-Fire. Of course they knew that Carson was a reckless spirit—drank a little—gambed some, but they did not think he was the companion of road-agents, the very ruffian whom they had met often and whose exploits filled the country with terror.

"I can prove what I say, gentlemen," averred Forbes. "I'll prove him to be the greatest scoundrel and hypocrite you ever saw, before three days come and go. If we organize this expedition properly we will clean out the Wolves of Satan's Gap in one attack. First let us capture the head and front of the bandit league."

"The plan is a very good one and one we'll adopt," said the chief of the vigilantes, and preparations were made to attack the robbers in their stronghold. A stage-coach, with a treasure-chest and a double guard was to leave town on the following night, and this coach would probably be followed by the mounted vigilantes who were to swoop down upon the robbers as they gathered around the coach.

The last rays of the setting sun were lingering upon the mountain-tops as Donald rode into town unconcerned, smiling and greeting all whom he knew.

Although he presented smiling features to an observer, his heart rankled with bitter passion and low curses arose to his lips as he rode along. It seemed as if everything was going wrong, lately. Failure after failure stared him in the face when heretofore success smiled upon all his plans. As if to add to his anger he saw placards here and there offering large rewards

for the capture of Wild-Fire. He remembered the day when such placards would have been torn down and the writers given a few hours to leave the town. Those were the halcyon days when he ruled supreme, when he had confederates in every nook and corner of the town. Recent arrivals and bitter feuds had removed these valuable auxiliaries, and by degrees Donald saw his power waning fast, and his enemies growing stronger and bolder every day.

These thoughts were teeming in his brain as he rode along, little dreaming that a crisis was at hand.

A smile rested upon his lips as he saw the ruins of the fire and he reviewed the scene that had transpired upon the unsightly premises.

He soon drew rein before a drinking saloon close to the ruins, and the very first man he met was his boon companion, Poker Jack.

"Hello, Jack! The fire made it unpleasant for you, didn't it?"

"Well, I should say so. What did you want to burn a man's shanty down in that manner?"

"I had to do it," was the calm reply.

"Had to do it?"

"Yes. If it had cost five times as much I would have burned it down to the ground, but I missed my game. The man I wanted to destroy escaped the flames."

"Yes, so I heard. But, the fire was a rough deal on me," said Jack.

"Not at all. Here's enough to put up another building, much better than the old shell. I came here purposely to pay you for the damage," and Donald handed a small pouch filled with golden coin, to the gambler.

"All right, pard! This makes my mind easy," said Poker Jack as he slipped the pouch into a side pocket. "Mado a haul eh?" he asked, with a leer.

"Well, yes. Haven't you heard of it?"

"Well I should say I did," answered Jack. "The town is wild over it. They're cooking up a hot dish for you."

"Who?"

"The vigilantes, and some of the miners."

"What do you mean, Jack?"

"They're going for you!"

"For me? How do they know I have anything to do with the Wolves?"

"They've dropped!"

Poker Jack said no more. The words told all that was necessary, but before Donald could reply a person entered the saloon and a quick sign passed between the new-comer and the chief of the outlaws.

"A word with you, captain," said he, and he walked toward a table and the three men sat down beside it. The new-comer leaned over and whispered, "You're in danger!"

Donald's hand flew to the hilt of a weapon and he gave a quick, searching glance in all directions.

"From what quarter?"

"The vigilantes have spotted you!"

"They have, eh? That's bad."

"Yes, captain. I attended a meeting this afternoon, and Forbes, the miner, gave you away to the society."

"Curse him! I'll have his life."

"Until he spoke you were safe. The plan is to send the coach with a double guard and the committee comes about a hundred yards in the rear of the coach. While you are busy with the box the vigilantes will swoop down from all sides. Now I've warned you, I'd better be making myself scarce or I'll be seen with you and that will make it bad for me."

"How many men will they send?"

"About ten on the coach and about twenty behind it."

The fellow arose and walked rapidly out of the saloon, and Donald sat facing Poker Jack.

"That looks bad—eh?"

"Yes, but it might be worse," said Donald. "Forewarned is forearmed. I'll give them a reception that will make them think the end of the world is at hand."

"You can do it if anybody can!" admitted Poker Jack, with a low chuckle. "But tell me, Cap, what was the racket between you and the young fellow that you left to burn up in the old head-quarters?"

"Nothing! Only he's in my way, and when a man is in my path the way to remove him is to make him 'hand in his checks.'"

"You missed it that time, though."

"Yes. Fire failed to accomplish anything, but Turner shot him as he was leaving the house."

"Who did? Turner?"

"Yes; shot him dead!"

"Turner is a lying scoundrel if he says he shot Fred Gordon! The young fellow lives, for I saw

him long after Turner fired at him and run, like the coward that he was."

Donald leaped to his feet, fairly foaming with rage. He gnashed his teeth, and his fist came down upon the table, almost shattering the rickety affair.

A strange light blazed in his eyes, and a malignant scowl swept over his features.

"Not dead!" he fairly shrieked. "Turner assured me that he saw him fall."

"'Tis false. I know that he lives."

A strange light suddenly broke in upon the outlaw. He had made a startling discovery, but did not reveal it to his companion. He started to the bar, trembling with passion, and had barely reached the counter when, from the side door and back window, a simultaneous rush took place, and before the astonished ruffian could turn to ascertain the cause of the commotion, full a dozen pistols were leveled at his head, and determined men presented the weapons, ready to fire at the slightest movement upon the part of the bewildered outlaw.

"What's this?" he demanded, fiercely.

"Don't move hand or foot," said Forbes, in a threatening voice, "or we'll riddle you with bullets."

Donald's quick glance told him that he could expect nothing by talking to the determined men that hemmed him in. A circle of polished steel surrounded him and restless fingers toyed with the triggers.

"Put your hands behind you!" cried Forbes sternly.

Donald obeyed, and in a few moments the outlaw was pinioned and his weapons removed from his belt.

"Now then, lead on, Foster!" said Forbes to a miner at his side, "and we'll follow with the prisoner."

Donald gnashed his teeth in his impotent rage. Where were his followers? His friends? He thought of the day when his voice could summon a horde of desperadoes to his aid, but now he was a captive in the hands of scarcely a dozen men. Truly, times had changed in Helena.

"How have the mighty fallen!" murmured the bandit as his captors led him away.

In a short time the news flew through the town. The desperate outlaw "Wild-Fire" had been captured.

CHAPTER XIV.

DONALD'S DOUBLE DANGER.

THE miners conducted the road-agent to a large wooden building and he was placed in a small apartment and the door locked.

He paced the narrow confines of his prison like a caged beast. His arms were pinioned in such a manner that he could scarcely move a finger. The room was devoid of windows and the only aperture was a small fireplace in one corner of the apartment.

With this exception nothing greeted the eyes of the captive but the bare floor and the white-washed walls. He could hear the voices of his captors in the next room and he placed his ear to a chink in the door, in a vain endeavor to overhear what was transpiring.

Nothing but a confused murmur reached his ears, and the outlaw then obtained a view of the group by peering through the chink.

To his consternation he saw Forbes with a rope in his hand and the miner was making a noose at one end of this rope.

The outlaw drew back with a shudder. He knew full well what that meant, "Lynch law,"—that he was the individual who would grace the halter. His courage forsook him and he trembled violently. His life was in his balance. He knew that soft words or entreaties would avail nothing, and he anxiously glanced around his narrow prison for some means of escape.

A slight grating noise reached his ears, proceeding from the direction of the chimney-place, and even as he listened, a small stone, apparently dislodged, fell to the floor.

Some one was descending the chimney! The outlaw's heart gave a wild leap of joy as the hope of escape dawned upon him.

In a few seconds the feet of a man appeared in the opening, and then a form emerged from the chimney-place and placing a finger upon his lips to enjoin silence, the man approached the bandit.

"Hist, captain! not a word!"

"Who is it?" asked the road-agent, in a hushed whisper.

"Jack Turner!"

It was indeed the very man whom Donald had sworn to kill! The ruffian was even now risking his life to save his leader from a violent

death—risking his life to save one who had fully determined to destroy him.

"Jack Turner?" echoed Donald, in tones of astonishment.

"Yes; be quick, captain; for the regulators are going to make quick work of you. They've got the rope ready for you."

Turner's bowie-knife cut the ropes and released the outlaw's pinioned arms.

"Now then, follow me up the chimney, and then make a bold jump for liberty! You'd better risk breaking your neck by jumping from the roof than from the limb of a tree with a rope around your neck."

Donald did not wait, but darted into the small opening and wildly clambered through the soot-lined passage, to the top.

Not a moment too soon was this accomplished, for, even as Turner's heels disappeared in the opening, and Donald's head emerged from the top of the chimney, the door was opened and Forbes entered the room. It was quite dark, and the miner could not see the prisoner.

"Come! step out here!" said he, in a gruff voice; "we've concluded to crush the head of the serpent and let the remainder of the reptile die afterward. Come! we've got the rope all ready for you."

Forbes waited a few moments for a reply, and a slight noise in the chimney excited his suspicions.

"Bring a light in here," he shouted.

A miner seized the oil lamp from the table and dashed into the small room. A hoarse cry of disappointment broke from every lip as the light revealed the empty room.

The outlaw had escaped!

"Quick, boys, he's made his escape by way of the chimney! There's two of 'em, and we'll nab them yet!"

The miners made a rush toward the front part of the house and dashed out into the open air. As they reached the rear of the building a man sprang to the ground and ran toward a horse standing but a few yards away. A horseman was just speeding away from the scene, and a simultaneous discharge of fire-arms rung out upon the night air.

Part of the group fired at the fleeing horseman, and the remainder discharged their weapons at the person attempting to mount the horse. As our readers will surmise, this person was Jack Turner. The desperado uttered a shriek of mortal agony and fell prone upon his face—dead.

Donald urged his horse forward amid a shower of bullets and was soon lost in the darkness. Forbes dashed toward the fallen man and turned him so he could look upon his features.

An oath escaped from his lips as he discovered the result.

"The arch-fiend has escaped!" roared Forbes, as he turned to his followers. "Mount as quick as you can and after the villain! Take him dead or alive!"

It was certainly a strange episode. The ruffian known as Jack Turner had yielded his life in attempting to save the man who would have destroyed him at the first opportunity. It is doubtful if Donald Stone's gratitude would have wiped out the bitter feeling that rankled in his heart—feelings that Fred Gordon's escape had awakened.

The outlaw scarcely gave the unfortunate man a thought. He sped away, bent upon escaping the fury of the men who he knew would soon follow upon his track.

"If Turner's dead so much the better," he growled, as he urged the horse forward, "for I'd settle with him any way for the lie he told me. Well! he worked the plan nicely, after all. He had horses ready and got me out of that scrape just in time to save my neck; but what matters it if he is dead? One less to share with!"

Thus the heartless wretch reasoned as the steed dashed along toward the stronghold in Satan's Gap.

Mile after mile flew beneath the hoofs of the horse and the sound of the bandit's pursuers grew fainter until he reasoned that the chase had been abandoned entirely.

"The hell-hounds!" he muttered, turning in the saddle to listen. "I'll have a settlement with them. Let them come! Let them follow me to the Gap! I defy them! In fact, I invite them to attempt it! The Boss of the Road is himself again, and woe to your treasure and your escort! I'll extort a heavy penalty for this night's work. I'll turn the Wolves loose and spare no one—not a soul!"

Donald went on in this bombastic strain while his voice vibrated with the anger that possessed him.

He gradually neared the Gap and his courage returned. His eyes blazed with renewed fires and he shook his fist threateningly toward the distant town of Helena.

He reached the outskirts of the retreat, but instead of pursuing the road he directed the horse over masses of loose rock in the direction of the canyon, thus making for the stronghold in a roundabout manner.

He had not proceeded very far, when the faint moonlight revealed a form lying directly in his path.

Donald reined the horse, and carefully scrutinized the prostrate body. It wore the mask of the league upon its features, therefore he could not discover the man's identity.

The outlaw chief placed his silver whistle to his lips, and the peculiar signal echoed from crag to crag.

Scarcely five minutes elapsed when dark forms appeared right and left, and the bandit was soon surrounded by his pet Wolves. One of them produced a dark lantern, and opening the slide he turned the rays upon the form upon the ground. Another removed the mask and exposed the features.

A murmur of surprise issued from the beholders. The features were those of a comparative stranger to the robber crew.

It was Crazy Luke who had thus fallen into the ravine and whose body lay directly in the path chosen by the road-agent.

"That's one of the fellers we were after," said the outlaw with the lantern. "He's the feller that helped the Dutchman to give us the slip."

The outlaw stooped down and placed his hand over the idiot's heart. A faint throbbing was distinctly felt.

"The man still lives," said he, looking up.

"By all means revive him. Spare no trouble to bring him to, and I'll put him through tortures that would make an Indian turn green with envy. So the rascal stole one of our masks! Ha! ha! ha! He'll pay dear for the privilege of having worn it!"

It was the first time Donald had laughed since leaving the Gap, and the outlaw felt in rare good-humor to think of the vengeance he would wreak upon the meddler. Several outlaws bore the insensible body of the idiot into the retreat, and spirits were forced into his throat. By degrees he revived and opened his eyes. An ugly wound upon his head bled profusely, and lent a terrible aspect to his wild features.

The eyes, however, beamed with a strange light, and the instant that they rested upon Donald Stone a cry something like the cry of a wild animal wounded to death, broke from Luke.

"I know you! I know you!" he shrieked. "Vengeance for my murdered wife—your sister!"

He sprang upon the outlaw, and his long talon-like fingers buried themselves in the bandit's throat. The idiot bore Donald to the rocky floor and paralyzed every effort to escape that terrible grasp.

"Take him away! Take him away! Why do you stand there while he's tearing me with his dagger-like fingers?" cried Donald, in tones of agony.

CHAPTER XV.

THE FATE OF THE ESCORT.

SEVERAL bandits leaped upon the idiot, and by dint of blows compelled him to release the gasping man whom he held in a vise-like grasp. It took several powerful ruffians to hold the enraged man and prevent him from again springing upon Donald.

The robber-chief sprang to his feet and howled like an Apache savage:

"Hold him! hold him, boys! I'll soon attend to his case!"

"Villain! murderer!" hissed Luke. "Do you remember the sister whom you slew? I am her husband, her avenger! There is one who knows you and who will avenge my darling if you add another crime to your soul. I have searched far and wide for you in my crazed moments. Crazy Luke is an idiot no longer. Thanks to the blow I received in falling, the clouds are removed from my brain. The past is clear and fresh in mind. I live for vengeance."

"Indeed!" said Donald, with a sneer—"live for vengeance, eh? Take him away. I'll give him all the vengeance he wants."

Our readers must bear in mind that we last saw the idiot and Dietrich in their precipitate retreat from the bandits' stronghold. Jack Turner and his comrades followed in rapid pursuit. Luke led the way and the German kept close at his heels. It was dark as pitch and the way over the rough rocks very difficult. A false step

might prove fatal and launch the fugitive into the black gulf below.

Suddenly the idiot uttered a quick, low cry and disappeared into a wide chasm that yawned at his very feet. Dietrich drew back horrified, and staggered forward in an opposite direction, scarcely knowing whither he proceeded. He could hear the confused shouts of the pursuing party, and now and then catch a glimpse of the flickering torch as it rose and fell, thus enabling him to locate his enemies.

The awful fate of his poor comrade appalled him, and he wandered aimlessly among the hills in a vain attempt to find an outlet. By some fatality he again found himself close to the spot where he had first escaped from the abandoned chamber, aided by Luke when the bandit had secured him to the powder-keg. He saw the jagged opening in the black mass of rocks, and scarcely knowing what he did, he passed through the aperture and again stood upon the floor of the cave where, but a short time before, he had escaped the frightful death which seemed at that moment inevitable. The broken powder-keg still lay in the center of the room and close by he saw the scattered powder.

The German passed out of this chamber into the rocky corridor and soon found himself close to the chamber where Edwina reclined upon the mass of robes. In a moment he was at her side and sunk behind the pile of furs to escape the notice of the bandit sentry who had just stepped to the exit of the chamber to note the return of several comrades.

Edwina betrayed no surprise and calmly awaited until the German spoke.

"Edwina!" said he in a low thrilling voice that sent the blood tingling through her veins. "Listen to me well before you reply. You are a captive in the hands of my bitterest foe. For almost a year you have remained passive in his hands while you knew that Fred Gordon sorrowed for you, mourned you as one dead. Could you love him and thus remain silently a prisoner?"

The beautiful girl turned her head slightly and in hushed tones she replied:

"I love Fred Gordon and will love him until the grave hides me from view. God alone knows how I have struggled to escape the persecution of the man I detest, and how utterly helpless I am in his power, but my heart is still loyal to my first, my only love. I am still true to him, and, dying, I will still whisper, I love him."

Before she had spoken the last word she was suddenly clasped in the German's arms and his lips were pressed to hers.

"Look up, my darling! Is it possible you do not know me?"

She could barely suppress the glad cry that arose to her lips.

"Fred! my darling!" she gasped.

"Yes, here at your side! We will perish together but never part again."

She could now see why her heart had leaped at the sound of her disguised lover's voice. Her heart had discovered what the eyes had failed to recognize.

It was indeed Fred Gordon who had artfully concealed his identity in the yellow-haired wig and painted features of the German, Dietrich. Even his voice was skillfully merged into the assumed character.

One long, lingering kiss and Fred whispered cautiously:

"Now remain here! Be not alarmed; I will be near you. Remember we leave this place together or it will be our tomb."

Silently he crept out of the dungeon-like chamber, and carefully avoided the stupid sentry. Fred again sought the abandoned room, and there, amid the numberless barrels, boxes and mass of rubbish that littered the cavern, he found a safe place of concealment and patiently awaited the coming of another night.

In the meantime Donald had been apprised of the escape and fuming like a maniac he urged his comrades on the trail of the fugitives.

Disheartened and vowing vengeance upon the two men whom he had left to guard the German, he passed the remainder of the night in a terrible state of anger.

Toward noon he mounted a powerful black steed and rode toward the town. Jack Turner lounged about the vicinity of the retreat for several hours, and then finally rode toward Helena. The finale to Wild-Fire's visit and the tragic end of Jack Turner's career have been related, and we have also seen how the road-agent, by coming through the intricate path, found the body of the idiot in the gulch.

A few words will suffice to explain the manner in which Crazy Luke survived the terrible

fall. He fell into a huge crevice in the mountain, but by a most providential occurrence fell into a species of "shoot" and he felt himself launched down this inclined passage until his rapid descent was brought to a sudden terminus by a most violent shock and then all was a blank. When he again recovered he found himself wedged in between masses of granite, and blood streaming down upon his face from the deep wounds upon his head.

The mask he wore probably saved his life and spared him further injuries. He crept slowly out of his prison and just as the sun had disappeared beyond the dark range of hills he again became unconscious from loss of blood, and fell among the boulders where he lay silent as death until the bandit chief discovered the prostrate body in his path and summoned the Wolves to his aid.

After the road agent had fully recovered from the surprise caused by Luke's attack he ordered the captive to immediate death. Let us hesitate before giving the final word.

The spirit of his murdered sister seemed to rise before him and the words died away upon his lips. He bade the desperadoes wait a few moments until he could devise a novel mode of death for the prisoner. Finally he exclaimed:

"Bring him into my own apartment. I will watch him myself."

Luke was led into Donald's private apartment and secured under the supervision of the outlaw chief. Donald summoned several bandits into the chamber to keep watch over the prisoner while he sought his companions and unfolded his plan for the robbery of the stage-coach and the destruction of the escort.

The day came and slowly passed until night again descended upon the desolate region and enshrouded Satan's Gap with a mantle of gloom.

Dark figures moved to and fro upon the "corduroy" bridge spanning the black chasm in the center of the Gap. The Wolves were busy at work upon the structure. Sentries guarded the approach from both sides while the scoundrels toiled with saws and axes upon the timbers of the bridge.

Like demons from the infernal pit they crept along from place to place, progressing in their wicked work. The outlaw and his followers were cutting into the timbers of the bridge, so that a certain weight would break the supports and launch those upon the structure into the awful gulf that yawned beneath it. Once in this chasm the ghoul-like creatures could descend to the bottom and at their leisure obtain the treasure and valuables.

It was gaining plunder and disposing of their enemies at one fell blow. The teeming brain of the bandit chief had planned the devilish work and his human wolves were rapidly executing it.

"Now then! Let them come," said Donald, in a tone of triumph. "Let them come into Satan's Gap. It will be their grave. Let the vigilantes follow if they can; I'll warrant that not one will return alive to Helena to tell the tale of the fate of his comrade. Now, Wolves, to your lair, and wait the coming of the enemy."

From the shadows of the towering rocks the masked figures fitted to and fro and sought the shelter of the battlements. From this point a good view of the Gap was obtained, and the log bridge appeared in the faint moonbeams that now and then intruded into the deep ravine.

Hark! A low warning whistle from the sentry down in the gulch! Then the noise of wheels and the clattering of hoofs. The coach was coming! Each masked figure leaned over the battlement of rock, and, weapon in hand, waited the startling denouement. A moment later and the four horses attached to the lumbering stage coach dashed upon the log bridge, and the wheels of the vehicle rolled upon the structure. The bandits had but time to observe the armed men upon the coach and catch a glimpse of the polished steel of their weapons, when a most terrific crash rent the air. The bridge parted midway, and the heavy coach plunged downward, dragging the struggling horses into the terrible gulf! A despairing cry arose from the unfortunate men upon the coach as they were hurled into eternity.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LAST OF THE LEAGUE.

A FEW hours before the stage coach departed from Helena a stranger arrived in town and made his way to the building wherein the stage company transacted their business. He was attired in dark clothing, and wore a large slouched hat. Iron-gray whiskers almost covered a face betraying lines of grief and sorrow. In a few words the stranger introduced himself to the

agent of the stage line, and the twain soon engaged in conversation. Fred Gordon's name was mentioned several times, and the villainous road-agent, Donald Stone, was the burden of the conversation.

From the coach official the stranger learned of the preparations on foot to surprise the robbers of the Gap, and also of Forbes's vigilantes.

The stranger arose.

"I will join the party of regulators," said he. "I have journeyed hundreds of miles to again behold the face of my lost child. I have struck upon the right trail at last, and I feel that she is at length to be restored to me. I will seek Mr. Forbes and join his party."

"All right, Mr. Carroll."

The name will suffice to enlighten the reader, who will at once understand the mission of the gentleman addressed as Carroll. It was Edwina's father, who had at last trailed the villain who had stolen his child to the wild regions of Montana.

Several hours later and the stage was en route to the Gap, and the armed men on the *qui vive* for the desperadoes.

About a mile in the rear of the vehicle rode the armed cavalcade of regulators, gradually gaining upon the coach as it neared the precincts of the robbers' citadel. Nearer and nearer to the Gap the ill-fated escort rode, until the gloomy towers and battlements of the weird place became outlined against the dull sky.

It was a ride into the jaws of death, for as the coach rolled upon the bridge that spanned the chasm, the timbers fell into the black pit, and the struggling mass of men and horses disappeared from view.

The bandits rushed from their hiding-places like hungry vultures and began the hurried descent into the ravine to plunder the dead and dying, and seize upon the treasure which they rightly surmised was in the iron-bound chest.

A loud shout of triumph broke from the masked scoundrels as they saw the success of the scheme.

Down, down into the gloom, into the very depths of the Gap swept the Wolves to feast upon the gold. Lurid torches lighted the way as the ruffians leaped from rock to rock in a desperate race to see who would be the first to plunder the bodies and secure the chest. Heedless of Donald's voice they dashed down, and the outlaw's voice arose in a storm of curses. He had unlashed the Wolves, and the smell of blood had crazed them!

Among the giant fragments of rock lay the wreck of the coach and the lifeless steeds. Here and there lay what was once a human being, but the terrific fall had crushed it out of all semblance to the human form divine. The iron-bound chest lay broken into a thousand splinters, its gold and coin scattered upon the bodies of the unfortunate men sent to defend it.

Not one had survived that terrific launch into space!

In a very short time the human vampires were among the dead bodies and fought among themselves for the precious metal.

It was indeed a strange, wild picture—a picture resembling demons at work in the infernal regions—demons claiming the soul of dead humanity.

The baleful light of the torches cast a sickly glare upon the horrible scene and upon the hideously-masked figures that struggled and hovered over the dead.

Far above this awful picture loomed the broken bridge and the dark side of Satan's Gap.

Donald Stone had been so busily engaged that the idiot had scarcely awakened a thought. The bandit leader gave himself up to the great scheme of destroying the escort and securing the treasure.

The wild yell of triumph that arose from the Wolves stationed near the gap reached the ears of the men detailed as guards. They rushed eagerly to the outlet to witness the awful plunge of the coach and its victims, then joined in the general rush for spoils and Luke found himself alone.

The bandits had barely departed from the chamber when Fred Gordon suddenly appeared before the astonished captive.

"One good turn deserves another," said he, "and you don't know how happy I am to know you still live. Hold on a moment; I'll release you."

Fred tore at the knotted rope and succeeded in setting the hands of the prisoner at liberty, and then darted toward the chamber to release Edwina.

"One moment!" cried Luke. "There's something in that chest that I want. I've noticed the villain was careful to lock it."

Luke seized a heavy knife and forced the hasp of the lock and threw open the lid of the chest. A hasty search revealed the package of papers, and he had but time to place them in his pocket when the hurried tramp of feet echoed in the passage. A moment afterward and the burly form of Donald Stone appeared in the opening, and a scream of rage arose to his lips. A heavy revolver appeared in his hand, and the villain raised it quickly and pulled the trigger.

A dull snap followed, and Donald hurled the pistol from him with an oath, and drew a heavy double-edged bowie-knife.

A strange occurrence, and one overlooked by the villain, had caused the outlaw chief to seek his caverns for safety.

While his murderous crew were down in the chasm, plundering the wreck, a terrific rattle of fire-arms suddenly broke upon the night air, and a shower of leaden missiles flew among the bandits. Fully one-third of their number fell upon the blood-stained bodies of their victims.

Before they could recover from their surprise a second murderous volley again swept them down like grain before the scythe.

"The vigilantes!" roared the road-agent, and he dashed madly toward the summit of the cliff in a frantic effort to reach the caverns in advance of the regulators.

Shot after shot rung through the gap, and one after the other the "wolf-heads" fell among the boulders while seeking to escape the rifles of their pursuers.

Swift and certain had retribution fallen upon the desperadoes, and the vigilantes were pouring into their citadel from all quarters. Donald uttered a wild cry of defiance and darted into the tunnel leading into the cavern. He dashed along until he reached his private retreat. His intentions were to seize Edwina and bear her away by a secret outlet known only to himself.

When he reached his apartment he was confronted by the idiot, and the foes were now face to face.

Luke leaped upon the powerful villain and drew the curious dagger from his belt. Before Donald could defend himself Luke had driven the blade of the rusty weapon into the bandit's bosom.

Donald heard the footsteps of his pursuers close at hand, and, with one tremendous effort, he hurled the idiot to the earth and sprung toward the opening to escape. A huge form bounded forward, and, leaping to the bandit's throat, bore him to the earth, and with its awful fangs lacerated the outlaw's flesh in a shocking manner.

It was Nero, the huge mastiff. The beast mangled the shrieking bandit beyond recognition.

When the regulators reached the scene Donald Stone was a shapeless mass upon the rocky floor, and the blood-stained brute was poised above him eagerly watching for a slight movement on the part of the outlaw in order to again spring upon him.

Donald Stone never moved again. His crime-laden soul had been summoned to the highest tribunal, and all that remained of the once dreaded Boss of the Road now lay beneath the paws of the dumb avenger who had avenged his murdered mistress.

The group of regulators turned from the scene with a shudder, and Luke summoned the beast to his side.

"Gentlemen," said he, "this dog has trailed that man for the murder of my poor wife—his own sister. If you think he has done wrong I'll shoot him."

"The dog has saved us the trouble of stringing him up to a tree," replied Forbes. "We offer a vote of thanks to the dog."

It is needless to say that the meeting between father and daughter was a joyous one and brought tears to the eyes of the stoutest miner in the assemblage. Fred and Edwina rode side by side on the return to Helena, and within a week the young couple were married and en route to the Carroll homestead, leaving the scenes of much sorrow and fraught with so many perils.

The vigilantes recovered all the stolen treasure and buried the unfortunate victims and their murderers also. A simple cross marks the spot where once the Wolves of Satan's Gap held high carnival. Beneath the cross lie the bones of their victims. Close by is a huge pyramid of boulders, marking the resting-place of Wild-Fire—the Boss of the Road and the evil genius of the notorious band once known as the Wolves of Satan's Gap.

THE END.

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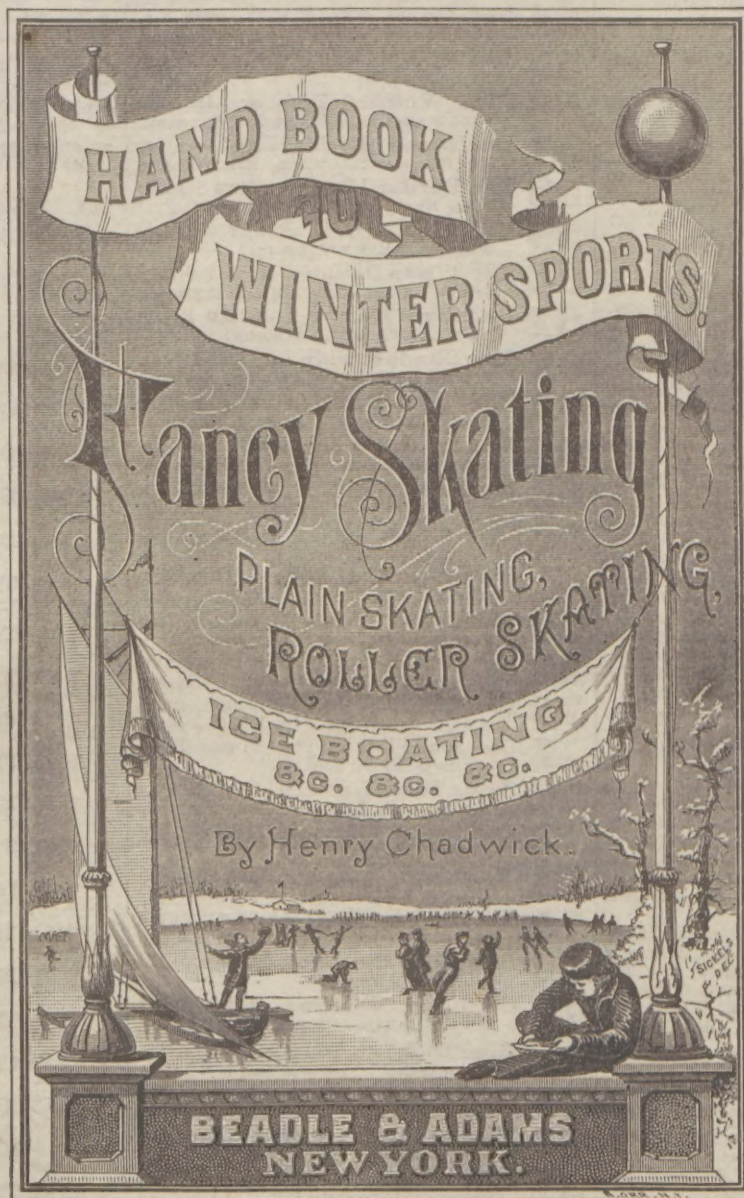
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